MARTHE
AND THE MADMAN

MARTHE AND THE MADMAN

BY JEAN DE BOSSCHÈRE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

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PART ONE

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I

My name is Pierre Bioulx d'Ardennes; I was born in. . . .But does it matter? I should like to be a poet, novelist and artist, and I am none of these. . . .What matters, however, is that at last I rid myself of my cruel memories by putting them down in these notebooks just bought. At last! Some day I shall tell how it was I cast aside modesty, so that I might confess without lying.

Yet this very evening, before bending my mind to the great decision, I wavered. It seemed that I should be brought short by great and unwonted difficulties, insurmountable to a spirit less bold than mine. First, as I have already said, I am not a novelist; next, I am bound to depict a town which has all the appearance of a thing of the imagination, so deeply sunk is it in the manners and customs of the Middle Ages. I shall then sketch in only such pictures of it as are needed to render comprehensible and perhaps pardonable the abnormal conduct of the two persons whose lives I am about to reveal. Lastly, and here lies another immense difficulty, I shall have to speak of my past without either wrath or horror.

Not that I want to plead for them, for Marthe and Pierre, or whitewash their faults, or vindicate Pierre of his crime, and try to fit incest into some system of

ethics, ancient or modern. Not at all. I want to show enough of their lives, sometimes with shameless minuteness which will I fear seem useless, and enough of the lives of those who surrounded them, so that, at the least, my memory will neither charge them with too heavy a culpability, nor yet perfidiously purify them, but, quite simply, do them justice.

I intend then to recount our mistakes and our crimes, and to recount them without anger. There come into my mind two memories, both very early and today very vivid. The first concerns that moment when I made the discovery, or when my mind grasped the horror, of what my sister Marthe's life would be, disfigured as she was, a horror which until that time I had but dimly sensed. The other memory: Marthe, eight years old, gliding away toward the edge of a field of ripe wheat. Her two companions squatted down in the stubble; they were going to tell her a secret. Only a few days before I had had my premonition of her misfortune, and the anguish I now experienced, foreseeing the practises to which she would be exposed, arose, it seems to me, from the fact that my sister, unlike the two young proselytes, was neither pretty nor normal. At that moment I had no precise opinion of this matter; I was inundated by a feeling of bitter sadness, a feeling that later accompanied the thought of death. The knowledge of similar indulgences has never caused me even so much as a secret qualm. That this knowledge had been passed on to Marthe did not, to my mind, make the initiation any more black. It was terrible because of her deformed face which put a barrier between her and all the pleas-

ures of the senses of which this was only a lame beginning.

Marthe was pale; taller and thinner than the average child of her age, she had intense velvety black eyes; a forehead too white and polished above an oval face; brown hair so dark that it seemed black. The left nostril was enlarged, slightly pulled down; below, the ineptly sewn flesh had grown around a white scar, dividing the nose, descending in little broken curves toward the upper lip, which had been tucked in by the stitching of the wound; the lower lip was full and pretty.

There they went, Marthe and her two companions. I was seated under the platform of an iron bridge, as wide as a public square, built on high stone pillars over which sounded from time to time the terrific vibrations of a long train. Under this bridge an old fisherman had shown me several infallible ways of catching fish. Since that time the spot had seemed to me a pleasant retreat. It was like being in a box at the theatre: closed in on all sides, save on the side which faced the river; the water, trickling through channels among the stones and pebbles, reached as far as the iris blooming along the bank, preceded by a spumy yellow froth. My fishing lines were quickly forgotten, and I busied myself, my heart beating with delight, picking up huge stones that served as a shelter for unknown aquatic insects. Under the arch of the bridge the water cut into a creek where it paused between two currents, then flowed away, leaving behind an assortment of marvels from the bottom of the river, strange little creatures, eels with feet,

and to heighten my emotion I fancied them all dangerous! In a tin box I stored these treasures which were later to be importantly inventoried. To watch the rise and lapse of the water, observe how creatures caught by the low tide saved themselves, was a perennial source of pleasure. Fish were rarely caught in this way, save at times by the thousand, all as tiny as mosquitoes, traveling in schools like swallows, and then for a space of five seconds they covered the wet sand with a moving scarf woven of silver scales.

Above me on the footbridge built next to the iron track Mimi, Scarab and Marthe were crossing over; they stopped. I overheard them making plans.

"Let's go behind the chateau," Marthe said.

"In the wheat field no one can see us," suggested Scarab.

"Over there," said Mimi, pointing to the field with her hand outstretched beyond the railing of the bridge, "where we went last week. You can still see the place where we slept. I saw where the wheat was trampled Saturday."

"You went there without me!" cried Scarab harshly.

"Just because I went there," Mimi replied, "must you be jealous!"

They kissed and passed over the bridge. They walked along the opposite bank and circled the solitary white house, which could be seen from the town standing out on the green plain. Had they turned round they would certainly have spied me watching them, but they did not make this move of caution, so excited were they by Marthe who, I could make out from her attitude,

was going with them for the first time, and had as yet no reason to be jealous.

A charming picture they made, these three graceful little girls, as they advanced along the brink of the river under the blue summer sky. Marthe was clad in white and wore one of those hats called *cabriolets*, adored by her because they entirely concealed her face. Her companions wore light-colored dresses and hats of braided rush, golden yellow.

When they sat down at the edge of the field of ripe wheat I could not but admire this realistic picture of the period: the river; the wide blue sky; the white house; the burning spikes of grain and the young girls gathering flowers, all glowing in the sun as if they were about to burst into a joyous peal of bells.

Out of flowers the girls made coronals; when all three had accomplished this sacred rite, they rose to their feet, looked about them carefully, then slipped into a furrow between rows of grain and so disappeared.

The science Marthe imbibed there seemed to possess weighty consequences, although it did not then enter my mind whether it was for good or ill. All my thoughts converged toward Marthe, Marthe disabled, without hope, less adapted than I was to find solace. I was so little gifted with the power of reflection or analysis that it was impossible for me to decide if that day's discovery were better for her than to be brusquely saved by a tremulous prayer, if her intelligence could be appeased by the abstract to the point of being consoled and fed by that invisible bread, vision, the just reward of prayers and youth. I gave

myself up to wondering if this new lore were not to prove a mortification in a life whose horizon withered and shrank even as she herself grew taller. Day by day her aloofness from the world increased and her chances for communicating with it as a normal person diminished. She grew older only to learn that the world which she imagined a garden, gaily flowering and drenched with peace and fervent beauty, was for her a desert.

If she had not been cursed, cut off from all love by her scarred mouth, I should not have given a thought to what occurred that day.

But for Marthe, disfigured, as she was, a new poison, it seemed, had been poured into her stricken veins, a poison that was bound to make her feel still more bitterly this excommunication. The Pythagoreans knew exactly what good was, and for them evil possessed no limits; the Church replies easily to our doubts touching the value of our actions, but neither the happy Greeks, nor our priests of today can answer the questions which, painfully, shape themselves in the secret depths.

I stopped fishing and walking back along the top of the bridge I sat down to wait for them, moody and absorbed. When they reached the spot where I was, Marthe paused without noticing that Mimi and Scarab, after having stopped to exchange a word with me, continued on their way, carrying wreaths of flowers in their small pink hands.

Abstractedly Marthe looked at the tiny creatures swimming about in my box, and started forward as one lost in a dream. At last she perceived my presence, and

B

while we sauntered back side by side she began at once to put questions to me in her abrupt manner, questions of a scriptural crudity and simplicity. She questioned as one new born, emerging from the original slime, still bruised and almost blind, blinks at its enemy, light—brilliant, metallic light, substituted, for the velvety warmth of darkness. This time her request for explanations seemed to be that of an oppressed person who had warred in vain against injustice, suddenly waking up in another existence of which she was completely ignorant, and not knowing whether she should give herself up to hope or fear. When she grew calm, I heard her final astonishing query:

"Do you know what marriage is?"

"I think so," I replied. She gazed at me and said nothing, as was her habit every time she believed she had bared her inmost thought.

A group of ragamuffins kneading mud-balls forced us to dart quickly through the green garden gate: flight it was, no doubt, but we thereby evaded the mud. A priest, with his finger to his chin, was striding by, reading in a small black book.

But I anticipate. The time has come for me to chronicle the period of our arrival in Rupel.

II

Rupel, bounded on three sides by undulating slopes, moats and meadows, was only a skeleton of a town, a dried-up forgotten document, a gray and brown archive.

Under the town tower spirals of wind grappled, paused, then rushed past one another in swift whirlwinds, breaking up into further ululations the howling of the dogs, splitting their barking until it sounded like the pulverized cries of a sinking boatful of women. The fronts of the houses were smoothly painted; the doors had peep-hole wickets and lattices at the windows. The silence of an immense monastery reigned in the deserted passage-ways of the town, a silence that supervenes after quarreling. Entirely subject to the volatile fluid of an epidemic, it was a town whose people had sought refuge on the healthful but barren sands. Windows and doors were locked. Alongside a wall three carts were hitched to dogs who by turns yelped furiously or whined. My mother was dragging me by the hand across the old cemetery with its dry weeds, twisted in the wind, unrelieved by flowers; nor was there a lonely butterfly or midge to be seen. Only bone dust on a subsurface of bony clay, impermeable as ivory.

"They don't bury people here any more," my mother said, pointing to several old tombs standing like whitened cuirasses of stone. Jawbones had worked to the

surface. We spied an iron spoon thick with rust among the bones, and an old porringer that raised itself from the mouldering soil toward the bowl of the sky. This was the first time a cemetery had made me curious, and the questions that sprang into my mind were more numerous than its rotting bones. I imagined that the dead were deposited here, but I did not know that they were buried under the earth. I thought of them as voiceless and very stiff under the rain, clad in gowns or blouses whipped up by gusts of wind. Death is such a rare thing, an unexpected snatching away; when it comes it is somehow never in our neighborhood. Yet a single death affects the whole world like flood and fire. I was not saddened that day by our visit to the cemetery; an unsatisfied curiosity coupled with morose gnawings of thought took possession of me, and I was too much absorbed to give free rein to the promptings of my heart, just as during my youth, whenever I took a new mistress, sensuality was drowned out by the poetic appeal of mystery.

A man brown as filth and nearly dead leaned against the wall. I then surmised that the dead were carried there; they did not arrive there all alone and simply lie down. Would he topple down and dissolve into the dust of bones?

The town even more of a desert for us because an unknown tongue was current in it, the wind whining in company with the starved dogs, my mother lamenting "We have lost our way"—all this combined to make my heart beat faster, rather than the walk itself across the cemetery with its arid greensward, its mongrel dung,

its porringer and whitened bones. Rumors overheard before our coming to Rupel, which we were now exploring for the first time, had wrought in my mind a picture of a town both hostile and cold, like certain accursed hamlets with their Saint Guy dance, their drunkards in brown rags—certain hamlets, I mean, of the Middle Ages of which chroniclers are wont to speak with archaic and reproachful shakings of the head. An accurate enough impression, as it happened, for the atmosphere of Rupel had not changed for several hundred years; the air had been corrupted by a vulgar microbe, as mysterious as electricity, which drained all generous impulses from the soul. The sand of the Campine, burning among the pines, blew noisomely on the wings of the storms. On the days that were bearable, the town was a withered image of Epinal, sadly discolored, over which bells clanged dissonantly. The priest was master there; the inn was a thorn in the side of amorous couples. There were two or three families, and every inhabitant knew the great-grandfather of his neighbor. Avarice, the sole virtue, seeped everywhere, occupying the place reserved in our souls by theology for all our vices and virtues; here indeed luxury invariably dragged men to the court of assizes and women to their ruin.

The yelping of dogs sounded farther off now. We had regained our proper road; it traversed the lay convent of Beguines, admired by hurried tourists and by painters with the fiber of an oyster. My mother's face was pale; her gown was caught by the wind. I can recall no single feature of hers at this time. My first

image of her goes back to the days, a little later, when I traced my first drawings with the crudity of a child's genius. Seated in front of her, I would remain motionless long minutes, simply to gaze into her enormously big black eyes whose color Marthe had inherited, her olive tinted flesh, as dark as that of Spanish women, her mouth somewhat wide and delicate, the lower lip forming a curve with a slight cleft in the center; the other lip sinuous, raised in the center by two brief arches. The shape of that upper lip was a reminder of my mother's English blood. Later I observed that her Slav cheekbones and the Marie Antoinette nose formed a strange irreconcilable contrast, not at all classic. The top of her nose was broad, but lower down very delicate and narrow, forming a curious triangle; the nose was prominent, thrust out slightly by the tense arch of the nostrils, fine and long. From this triangle, so wide between the eyes, a delicate, scarcely discernible line divided the face all the way down to below the chin which was hard and clear-cut. I thought of the Queen of Navarre by the cruel portraitist, Holbein.

As we approached the Calvary of the convent of Beguines I gazed at my mother. Her well-nigh palpable terror, whether it was written on her features or whether her tremors infected me directly, I shared not through a sense of filial duty but through the medium of her hand which clasped mine. Her anguish and the morose town, both weighed on my young heart, which as yet felt no wrath, for this was before the corrupting torment of experience. Divining that she pitied Marthe more than anybody else, I too thought that her plight

was unfair; but the sense of that injustice was not localized as long as what I saw about me seemed to lack grace, to be both deceptive and unfair. The gray streets congealed in silence, the yellow grass between the paving stones, the yelping dogs, all loomed up as some immobilized evocation, aimed to wound us.

I had always been obedient, but not out of mere pious "goodness." I was attached to my mother by certain secret bonds, similar to those, imperfect and often simulated, which draw together adults who are stained with the same eccentricity. I was not the sort of devoted son one reads about in novels or the sort whose praises one hears sung by sentimental old ladies. Very early I had straightened out in my mind those feelings which singled her out as the only person who understood that I was born for a life, which if not abnormal would, nevertheless, include sins against the social order, and possibly crimes of the same rank; the only being on earth who could discern, under many veils, the intelligence so far obscured that the finest talents, had they existed, were thereby kept from normal unfolding. She would not have altogether accepted me had I been simply an angelic child, unharmed by the strange poison which had sapped and weakened the mechanism of my brain. My mother had admitted, in her heart, that I was a cretin, with a painfully darkened mentality. Mothers, as everybody knows, when their sons betray genius, usually make excuses—they were not "all there." But a young Napoleon, a young Victor Hugo is hailed with satisfaction. My mother felt, through that part of her being which is not intelli-

gence, that I was equal to murder, and she had nothing to console her since she did not know, as well, that upon reaching maturity asceticism would tempt me as much as crime. She knew me better than I knew myself, and this fact was, I suppose, of greater satisfaction to me than the possession of her love.

Today at forty I no longer possess the art needed to throw light on the bond that united us. It was not what is called love. She favored me to the point of sheer injustice. I will here record two occurrences when her attitude seemed to justify this opinion. Wise, moralizing people would, I am sure, have disapproved of my mother. It was at the period of my first drawings, made even before I was able to form my letters. A child's drawing is perfect in its own eyes. Twenty years afterward, while turning over the papers left by a dead friend who owned the drawing of a horse I had made, the sheet struck me like the map of an unknown country, awkwardly copied. At the age of three I had set down the absolute expression of a galloping horse, proud of his speed, proud of his master. The drawing consisted of but six or eight lines, none of which suggested a horse. Yet certain of my drawings executed at the age of five were less chaotic; and if they had attracted the attention of some interfering busybody there would have been another painter on the endless roll-call of this wretched tribe.

Two drawings made during my fifth year were defended by my mother, I recall, against the verdict of my father. One of them was supposed to represent the violent pregnancy of a neighbor, the baker's wife whom

I had seen, immense, blocking her doorway. Her breasts were more cubical than curved. I gathered that a body was about to burst forth out of that baker's wife, so enormously swollen. After the extraction of the tumor I saw her again, infinitely thinner, and I told the story of this episode in a series of absurd drawings, but less sinister than reality itself. The corset of the baker's wife burst, scattering bits of cloth and egg-shell in all directions and spilling forth a young child, oval in shape. My father, who was a bit of a pessimist, thought that the drawing augured ill for the moral character of its author; and he had somewhat more to say when, once again, according to him, I relapsed into criminal practises. The second drawing: I had cut out of paper a *petite bouilloire* (it was thus I called the male genital organ) in the only position which at that age I knew it. My father was no doubt right for in the future many forms of this sort and other curiosities of the same kind filled my mind: or it may be that this impression of number is due to the fact that these memories are so deeply imbedded. Such incidents looked upon as normal tend to disappear later on. Life in a narrow little town, crushed as we were by boredom and the isolation in which Marthe's misfortune placed us, combined with our reputation as infidels, favored, and even gave rise to, a large number of these curiosities.

III

The house of Julienne St. Albans was the largest and tallest in Rupel. It was selected because of its impressive proportions and also for its spaciousness which seemed to give proof of something behind the imposing facade; in the yard and garden, there were out-buildings, stables, dove-cotes and bird-cages. It was a very old house whose dampness, saltpeter and mushrooms put tenants to flight. When the porte-cochere was opened the spongy odor of mould reached us, blent with the chill of frog-haunted cellars where water dripped throughout the entire year. Julienne St. Albans, my mother's sister, married to the major in command of the fort, was already ailing due to the exhalations of the damp moss which covered the walls; but social rank, in a small town, is maintained and assured by the size of one's house-front. . . .

"My dear Helène!"

"Good morning, Julienne. Many thanks for having given me these addresses."

"Who else could have helped you here? Let me give you a bit of advice. Have you really considered this step? You know, I'm delighted that you've decided to live near me. But my love for all of you obliges me to tell you that *in your circumstances* Rupel is simply not the place for you to live in!"

"But we've got to. Raymond, like your husband, has to live in the town where he has been sent, starting with this month."

"You might have gotten an authorization from the minister to live at X. Raymond could have travelled back and forth." Such a thing was of course out of the question. A military doctor cannot leave a town where he is alone, without colleagues.

"And Marthe," said Julienne. "You haven't brought her, have you?"

"The fatigue of the trip would have been too much for her. And then there's her sensitivity."

"They say she's growing rapidly."

"Yes, she is," answered my mother. "Mayn't I see my niece?"

"Of course, Honorée is having her music lesson in the green parlor. She's making wonderful progress! She astonishes even her teachers. She can write in two languages, in Flemish and French," said Julienne, turning toward me and drawing me to her.

"And he's a good little Pierre? He's nice to his poor mamma?" (Poor? I repeated to myself.) She then questioned me about my mother in a less affected tone. I simply could not bear the distrust and suspicion of the worthy personages of this fine house. She questioned me cleverly, without an inkling that in the very near future my coming to Rupel, my behavior at school, my vagabond habits and, later on, my immoralities, would be a source of humiliation, whose disagreeable features were scarcely to be counterbalanced by the luxurious feeling that she was as immaculate as an albatross. She did not

foresee that I would be a source of humiliation even greater than innocent Marthe.

Past the windows filed several black-cassocked priests, with curved backs, and after them a gang of young blackguards dragging a dead cat.

Julienne St. Albans showed regret at not being able to accompany us with a modesty naïvely emphatic. She was unable to leave the house before the piano lesson was finished; we vaguely heard the sound of it coming from the green parlor—mounting, heaving against the closed doors, presently melting, stifled by the wavering of the tones, and then rising once again.

She gave us the address of the woman who kept the keys of the house to let. It was not as large as her own, but the garden was more spacious; it gave on the open country, was neighbored by fine trees and, finally, it wore an air of sufficient importance to win for the new military doctor the exact degree of respect to which his rank, fortune, and his relationship to Julienne St. Albans entitled him.

Some seconds after the last bits of broken music had travelled through the rooms, reaching us so, Honorée came into the vestibule, as vast and empty as a convent.

"Go with your aunt," Julienne said to her good-naturedly, always modest: "She knows the town better than I do, and she is quite unafraid, sometimes to the point of recklessness. She uses her head and is very careful."

We made our way through several desolate streets which passed convent walls and military depots. At the

end of the town we spied a clump of old trees, a tower in which a sharp-toned bell was ringing, and a Spanish gable mantled with green moss. Bridges often took the place of streets, spanning the two rivers which sought each other, joined, separated, cutting and recutting the red flesh of Rupel, forming a sketch of Bruges or giving travellers an excuse for exchanging reminiscences of Venice. There were public squares, on market days crowded with fish and cattle-vendors; on other days they were so deserted they seemed far too big; it was as if a fire or some other catastrophe had forced the townsfolk to flee to a distant protected zone. A basket-weaver was weaving rushes in front of his shop. The street was bordered by the river, walled by high stone quays. The court-house near by was the finest building in the town; it was four or five centuries old, with a severe square belfry and four pepper-pots, a belfry rising like the pivot of a compass which had traced the semi-circle of houses and the public square. The tower had a frivolous roof, the only smile that hovered over Rupel. We passed a narrow street which for many centuries had been occupied by a brewery. Barrels were being rinsed, and other shining clean barrels were leaving the brewery on a long wagon whose creaking mingled with the bells the horses dangled and with the blows of the whip which the driver wielded vigorously, reddening with the effort.

With a nail-tipped pole two chlorotic lads fished for an apple fallen through the grating over a sewer. The odor of boiling hops mixed their warm aquatic fragrance with that of molasses and cloves issuing from a

neighboring grocery store, and also with the miasma of cellars; all these odors floated about, blending with the mustiness of mouldering leaves and with the market produce which was spread out on counters and in baskets. Separated from the brewery by a vaulted alley was the police station, a solid and severe white block, with small-paned barred windows. Opposite the largest inn of the town stood the houses of several political dignitaries, and important business men of the district; and also the modern red-brick house, in Flemish-Spanish style, occupied by the rich grain merchant, M. Colen, whose wife, much later, was to provoke a scandal. An account of this will appear in my story in due place because it was a subject that Marthe brooded upon. This was Rupel, mouldy and windbeaten.

Honorée walked two paces in front of us with the impudent assurance of Venetian children who point out their canals and their golden house-fronts to strangers. I discovered later that she made more than one detour so that we might have a just conceit of her importance, and that she herself might bask in all the glory reflected upon her by her leadership of the walk.

Honorée was a real character; her being seemed to be possessed by the same stupefying gas of comfortable inanity that shuts out every other spiritual fluid from the cranium of an old soldier. Physically she was a little girl whom you could safely turn loose in a satyr's garden.

She had an instinct for adjusting herself to practical

opportunities, to sordid economies, foregoing simple pleasures out of sheer stinginess, a stinginess that plunged its bitter roots into the abstract, to the point of economizing her movements, and the labor she expended in evacuating her bowels. She applied, rather naively, the useful facts of life which her parents were always emphasizing in her presence. She seized upon and quoted every proverb, every adage that served her virtue of avarice.

Such people were common enough in Rupel. I should not have described the exemplary flower of them all, if Honorée had not been, among Marthe's friends, the one who was held in highest esteem by others and a precocious model of the town.

We reached the house where the guardian of the keys lived. Her six-year-old daughter was to become another of Marthe's friends, and although she was at the opposite pole of society—that of tradespeople and small shopkeepers—such a friendship was admissible until adolescence, for my sister, like lepers, could not choose her friends as she pleased.

Her mother was a widow, with a jovial red face, who did not deny herself certain pleasant indulgences. She brought up her daughter in the tiny shop with its no less cramped back room. The odor of sugar, raisins, blended with that of lard and of anis; also, there were marbles and tiny playthings for sale. The widow's child outwardly resembled a wooden doll which some jester had travestied into the form of a devil, a comic study in pure perversity. Her name was Mimi and her job was to rule over her mother and her mother's shop with a

great show of energy, a despotism which was productive of good results. The attitude of her mother, whose nose was more generously powdered with red than her cheeks, was expressed in a meek desire to identify her own will with that of her daughter by anticipation, and thus to keep harmony between them by always yielding to her imperious and irrevocable commands, as well as to the grasshopper gestures which went with them and the lively glances from her pale-blue eyes, as sharp and impudent as the rays of a reflector. Her cheeks were framed in a sort of distaff of blonde hair, a blonde parenthesis, and a ribbon knotted to look like a dragon-fly invested the top of her head with two black horns. She was a little blonde devil, an abscess in which all the corruption in the town was concentrated, a corruption as active as the yeast in a warm ball of dough. Mimi was a love child in whom her mother still nursed a delectable memory.

There you have Marthe's second friend, sinking her teeth into an immense hunk of bread with two voluptuous slices of sausage on it. She followed us into the house near by which her mother had unlocked.

She chased off an idiot and a number of children who were wallowing in mud on the entrance steps: bare bellies, peelings, filth and urine.

The house had been built by the owner, a rich burgher who lived in the neighborhood. There was a broad facade along the street, too heavily burdened with ornaments. The two wide windows at the right of the double door were those of the first salon; another at the left was to be that of my mother's boudoir. Four

stone steps led up to the spacious vestibule which was closed-in at the other end by double glass doors giving on the garden. In a direct line with this door and the one we had just passed through was another door, of green-painted wood, at the bottom of the garden, near a cluster of sheds at the right. This *porte-cochere* was nearly always closed; it was opened only for carriages and for the carrying-off of manure from the stable. Behind the boudoir climbed the slow spiral of the stairway; then came the pantry, with an entrance to the cellar, the kitchens, the wash-house, the store-room, and the kitchen garden which stretched all the way to the green gate. The other side of the house consisted of three rooms; a second salon, separated from the first by folding doors, whose four panels opened and closed like shutters, and the dining-room from whose windows one could glimpse the garden across the glass roof of a hot-house.

The windows of the second story looked down upon a side street with a view beyond of apple trees in bloom in the springtime, then a field used in winter by skaters, and lastly the river. To the north, we made out one of the boulevards which encircled Rupel, with the "pest-house" at the end; immediately below was the broad street. The complicated view to the west requires detailed description since it will be the scene of many of the happenings which, as calmly as possible, I am going to recount. Opening the side windows, we were assailed by the music of bells which penetrated the rooms, an anxious song which vainly sought entrance through shut windows whenever we were away from

home. The sounds possessed a certain definiteness and reality to which we were sensible, and often they forced us to a moment of silent contemplation. These bronze tones, always the same, warned us of their presence, assured us of the unfailingness of their murmurs in our ears throughout all the years we were to live as vassals to them.

To the north, parallel with the axis of the garden, ran the continuation of the boulevard which we observed from the other side of the house and which our street interrupted with a causeway, its two sidewalks and two white pavilions being the remains of the ancient gate to the military zone. The boulevards that encircled Rupel had become promenades bordered by poplars and shrubbery, formerly the escarpment of the fortifications. Farther beyond us, between the row of trees and the ancient wall, was the old Chartreux garden now changed into a vegetable garden. To the south we spied a Gothic church with a Roman base looming above the roof of the sacristy, and the house of the sacristan, both of which, as well as the apse, were built over the old cemetery. At our feet, our own garden, next to that of the tax collector, our future neighbor, and gardens belonging to two or three small houses, one of which was Mimi's; then a small street which led to the Gothic church dedicated to Sainte Clotilde. At the end of these modest gardens which touched the house of the sacristan, stood a brush factory whose steam exhaust, like the pendulum of a watch, beat out the seconds with a small jet of white steam which apparently never drew breath save when the clamor of the bells annihilated

it. Between the vegetable garden, several hectares square, and the boulevard set with trees muscled like hardened lava, rose an ancient hill topped by one of the numerous mills of the neighborhood. The golden yellow clay of the slope was sliced down like a butter roll to be carried off in carts whenever building contractors needed it to mix with lime and cow-hair. It resembled the half of a Holland cheese. The eminence itself with its fragrance of wild grasses, its thorny bushes giving shelter to insects, and its bird nests, delighted me as much as our own garden and the house with its nooks and crannies full of surprises. A romantic house, an acanthus garden, and fine hiding places. I saw at once that my mother would rent it.

Honorée conducted us back. She avoided the long street opening into the *Grand'Place;* we passed down the alley which detached itself obliquely from it, a miserable little street belonging to the district attorney. The two walls were pierced by low narrow doors; a single window lit the first of the two rooms which was entered directly from the street. These haunts were called neither homes nor houses, but quite crudely *holes;* and the street was known among the poor, the waifs and outcasts as the Street-of-the-Lice. The beggars, the tinkers, the ole-clothes-men and vendors of rabbit skins who there took refuge gave their address with a hard kind of poetry: sixth hole in the Street-of-the-Lice. The tourists who came to visit the convent went into ecstasies over this alley, which at times excited the ravenous birds of prey in Rupel. The "man-eater"

who had erected these crazy patchwork houses often haled into court the gentlemen who inhabited them.

"You must walk in the middle of the street on account of the lice," Honorée said. All in all, it was a famous place, a curiosity of the town, of which—by dint of showing it to visitors—the citizens of Rupel had grown proud. With head erect, a neutral expression on her face, Honorée walked rapidly; her face expressed neither disdain nor pity nor fear of abuse—for she knew how easily you might be victimized! If you don't take care! The matter was simple enough; she knew how a little girl of her class should pass through mean streets, particularly this one, so clearly set apart. It is not quite the thing to smile, for that disarms one, nor to look about, for that is the first step toward weakness. At one extremity of the street where it meets the more decent part of town, it is generally agreed that it is not amiss, in spite of the danger of the dole's falling into the hands of an imposter, to drop a sou by way of alms, extending the arm nearly horizontally, the elbow on a level with the shoulder.

In spite of his open door the scraper of rabbit skins was scraping away in a cloud of dust. A woman hunchback, as broad as she was tall, was nursing a baby; two other children, the older one cross-eyed according to the classic formula, were playing with a broken spoon, the handle of an umbrella, and some filthy rags. From a distance, where an old man was weighing bones covered with carrion in a pair of wooden scales, there came to us the stench of a charnel house.

A priest with reddened eyelids greeted the old man, Honorée and us.

The pavement of the public square resounded like a surface of ice to the ringing hoof-beats of a horse. Horse traders in blue blouses were gauging the value of the animal's legs. There was no other stir in the center of the town save several lines of school children returning home from school accompanied by a teacher dressed in gray, with necktie rising above his collar. He was a man of forty in baggy trousers, quite humiliated and degraded. Then we crossed a wooden bridge over the river flowing between its high quays; brown-sailed boats, their tarred sides sunk deep into the water, bared their bellies heaped with blue mussels, having just put in from fishing trips out at sea. While we lunched, these sails swayed and surged in front of our windows.

The windows on the other side of our new house offered us little pictures of the right bank: an old bridge at the corner of the house, white pigeon houses, a green and black water wheel and a blue windmill. Behind the house and beyond the outhouses spread the meadows we had glimpsed from the windows of the empty house, as in a canvas by Vermeer de Delf or Ruysdael.

Julienne St. Albans' husband came home from the fort. He was a major and a sort of retired knacker, who was rarely to be seen in uniform. A large rosy person invariably muffled in black cloth; over the white vest across his stomach stretched a double gold chain, as if nothing were better fitted to serve as barrier against attacks of ridicule.

His face seemed redder in contrast with his hair, since his adolescence absolutely white, like a scalp wigged in lamb's wool. His spectacles distorted his large porcelain blue eyes, which seemed to overflow the thick glass, magnifying them until they looked like soap bubbles eager to mirror as great a variety of things as possible. At other times they took the form of blue lentils bewildered by a frivolous light; and at still others they resembled violet pears incrusted with small squares and white losanges. The huge head, round and glassy, when viewed in relation to his stiff gestures, gave him the grotesque appearance of a diver hoisted back on dry land, in spite of all his efforts to give the impression of dignity.

Indeed, his eyes had so much the air of being only bizarre objects, a target for the irresponsible play of light, of two simple multi-colored crystal globes, that they inevitably gave the Major of the Divers his celestially foolish look. My portrait of him is not complete until I add that he owned two canes, one to help him get to the fort, similar to that carried by a Flemish country policeman, and the other a precious rattan on which he liked to lean every Sunday, his red hairy hand clasping the gold knob.

Magnanimous, self-sacrificing, all during luncheon they seemed to be bowing to the decision of an unjust fate: our arrival in Rupel, where hitherto they had enjoyed an irreproachable reputation, seemed to loom upon them threateningly.

"Julienne is president of the Woolen Stocking and Belt Society," the Diver informed my mother.

"But aren't you president of the Excursionists' Club?" put in Julienne, fixing us with a humble look in which could be discovered the contrary expressions of dissimulation of pleasure, and of its opposite: unswerving devotion and the terrific fatigue of those who unfailingly fill the breach, forced by their nobility of soul to undertake insipid tasks whose only reward is the ingratitude of those who are helped.

"I am after all the oldest member," said the Major, apologetically. Modestly his eyes opened wide, showing two blue cartilages, like the metallic flashes that gleam in the midst of purple meat in the shambles of butcher shops. The moral of a small town is: *Castrati contegnosi modesti.*

"We're ready."

"We'll go by way of the boulevards."

"Pierre and I are tired," my mother said.

"It is impossible to make a detour," Julienne St. Albans said. I wasn't quite sure what she meant by that, but subsequent signs from the Diver made us realize that my mother's dress was not quite what was being worn in Rupel, in color or design.

We had to follow the quays until we reached the "pest-house," cross over the passageway and so turn into the boulevards. Above the horizontal arabesque of the town a multitude of steeples with crosses showed the devout the position of the convents, opening their louvre-windows to the crows. A squat tower, symbolic of the citizenry, wore a Chinese bonnet on top; another severe square tower represented the religion of Christ with a steeple which had the disturb-

ing aspect of a gigantic phallus. There were other towers less pretentious, which existed to keep the priests properly nourished every day, and the bigots somewhat less often. On all sides were glassy green meadows which extended right up to the very edge of the red brick walls of the town.

To the north of Rupel, beyond the boulevards, lay fields furrowed by the metallic lines of irrigation ditches. Nearer, close to a big iron bridge, over which a train laden with fresh-cut hay—the only product of the countryside—was just then passing, goaded by the white arm of its steam, stood a big white house. At first view this house made me tremble with emotion because it resembled the house of my grandparents near Bouillon, so filled with tender memories: a drowsy house with vast rooms, set amid gardens whose limits blended with the thickets at the edge of a plateau: an old house which has had thirty years of repose during my thirty years of restless journeying.

The river flowed between banks of a terrifying height; one peered over them and beheld, forty feet below, the swirling current, losing its course, finding it again, brawling with the grass and foaming about the piles of the bridges; the water was always in an ugly humor, cocking its eye like a bulldog ready to swallow up the incautious passerby.

IV

Under the rampart of a hornbeam hedge, broken by arches of an ancient aqueduct, three boys were crouching, busily kneading mud in the center of the triangle which they formed. The three morticed shocks of hair, impenetrable as a branching bit of old wrought iron, were absorbed, as if they were in the niche of a church or in a three-lobed confessional. In an open sort of nest, like the valve of a mollusc, the three young gnomes mixed the fluid with the solid, the liquid corrupting the integrity of the dust, the latter soiling the languid feminine water. With a crock, a small tin sieve and mussel shells they were moulding various sorts of vases, absorbedly participating in a kind of religious rite. One of the officiating neophytes making sacrifices to the god of form—and symbolic in his filthiness—was the son of the hunchback in the Street-of-the-Lice. I shall call him Cross Eyes in this story for we never knew his real name; the other was his brother whose rags succeeded in covering him about as well as a transparent layer of lint. The third lad wore less dubious garments, made of patches, neatly sewn together; his handkerchief, a shrieking red, will serve to designate this young scion in the sequel of my narrative.

Crocks, shells and moulds all served to give their impress to the shining black mud; with these tools they

managed to copy the panels of a deeply sculptured door. The black mud being at last used up and the fountain too far away and the creek too close to the meadow where the priests were accustomed to walk like black phantoms, they tapped their *petites bouilloires* for the warm liquid needed to soften the earth. A thin vapor now rose from the altar which, unknown to the officiants, might have been raised to the Potters of the Marsh.

Mimi, the blonde devil, would have joined them if she had not been asked to escort us, a task which she accomplished with scorn and irony toward her charges, out of a sense of pride applying herself to her duty, which was to conduct us to a vegetable gardener, although she recognized how absurd and inane the duty was. It was the first time that Marthe and I had gone out unaccompanied; I don't know just how it came about.

Dropping her smile of sly humor, Mimi leapt with joy when she learned that she was to conduct us: an unexpected windfall, a road to adventure, to perilous encounters. My mother, alas, chilled her enthusiasm by giving her a hundred instructions and indicating minutely the route we were to follow. Mimi walked along, sulking, a little anxious, her hand closed over the note which she was to give to the vegetable gardener, a list of vegetables made out by the cook. These many warnings would have killed the initiative of the most original and resourceful. How could she hope to get any fun out of the expedition if the solicitations and even the insults of beggars had to be ignored, if even the places where

we crossed the street were all provided for in the itinerary?

We walked between the shrubbery which lined the boulevard; I asked Mimi why she was so red, and she blushed still more at my question.

Two small ovals, red and flat, were painted on her cheeks; the blue of her pupils verged on violet; her hair was disorderly.

"You're crazy, I'm not red," she replied shrugging her shoulders and crossing over to put Marthe between us.

"What is that man doing?" Marthe asked. The conversation consisted in our asking questions of an idiotic simplicity, and of Mimi's replies, which were by turn sarcastic, severe or merely weary.

"Don't you even know what fishing is? He is catching fish. That's a line with a hook at the end where the fish hangs by the mouth."

"But why?"

"Because he wants to catch fish!"

"But why does the fish hang himself by the hook?"

"What a dunce you are!" In spite of her intelligence the role of the hook didn't seem to her of greater importance than that of the fishing rod. The presence of the worm or any other bait was so self-evident that it was impossible that my "why" should arise from the fact that I did not know of the existence of this cruel and constant intermediary.

"The other man is just watching. Why doesn't he catch fish too?"

"He hasn't a rod."

"Is it dangerous so near the water?"

"Yes. At the end of the year, there'll be a hundred men fishing here for a prize. The fisherman who catches the biggest fish gets the prize."

"But isn't it the fish that catches hold of the hook?" Marthe said. To Mimi this must have appeared an indescribably stupid question, for she said nothing for several minutes. We strolled, dwarf children among the giant poplars, gray straight towers with a universe of leaves at their tops, along a grass-bordered road between rows of lilac bushes. Now and then a lesser road branched off from the main one toward the river, and from it one could glimpse through the hedge the turbulent water bending the grasses several fathoms below; then the road rejoined the trunk from which it had strayed. Silence reigned. Only a train murmured in the distance. You could have held up a timid man there in broad daylight. Only two living creatures were to be seen on the road picked out for us: a pair of lovers seated on a bench, locked together in each other's arms, nose to nose.

"What are they doing?" Marthe asked. A burst of laughter came from Mimi, a sort of disgust for the brats she had so cheerfully undertaken to accompany.

Silence. Mimi greeted the lovers, uttering their names.

"Then you know them. What are they doing?" Marthe insisted.

"They're kissing. What fools they are!" she added, walking more quickly as if to save herself from the contagious miasma of idiocy. I recalled this insistence

of Marthe's several years afterward, when she questioned me about physical love.

"Haven't people ever fallen in here?" I asked. Mimi understood and replied like a weary person who is no longer surprised at anything.

"Once, yes. They had been missing for three days. Two men and a policeman searched for them in a boat. They had a long pole and poked about in the water. Afterward they dragged one of them out. He had swelled up and was quite black. I saw him."

"Did they bury him in the cemetery?"

"No, they left him on the bank. At noon Doctor Roux came, or another one who has gone now but who dressed just like your father; and they placed him on a black oilcloth litter." Mimi was unable to say whether he had been laid in the cemetery with the bones and the porringer, lying all wet on the wind-filled grass.

Presently we came to a monumental old doorway, one of the two or three relics, besides the pavilions near our house, of the ancient fortifications.

"Why is he standing there?" I asked, pointing to a soldier in the uniform of the time—yellow, red, blue-gray and black.

"That's the sentinel."

"Do you know him?" I demanded, blind to the fact that Mimi was cursing our stupidity.

"I don't know all the soldiers," replied Mimi, and for the first time there was a hint of humility in her voice.

"But there isn't any war," I said.

"It's on account of the powder," Mimi announced

with authority, finding my question less absurd than the others.

"And at the other entrance there isn't any powder," said Marthe.

"It's on account of enemies." Mimi could not explain why there were sentinels, powder and gates, but no war. Moreover she was excessively weary of these companions of hers who knew nothing, who chattered foolishly and asked silly questions. She quickened her steps, evidently wishing to discharge her duty as speedily as possible. Yet she knew that behind the hedge of the vegetable garden which we were at that moment passing there were beehives. It would have been an adventure involving bravery to approach one of the apertures where the hedge was thin; but today, responsible as she was for the lives of these two big idiots, she was content to look at the bee-houses from afar.

"There are bees in there," she said pointing to the hedge.

"Are there very many?" asked Marthe, eagerness and fear in her black eyes, burning with curiosity.

"Yes, in the hives," Mimi returned.

We put our heads through the opening in the hedge. At a distance of several steps the three gods were playing in the black mud. Cross Eyes was making the arch of a colonnade, and the other two sculptors were fashioning rose-windows made from shells shaped like stars.

Around the five beehives in the garden a veil of bees swung back and forth. We had never heard such an anxious humming. A flight of them grazed us

lightly; suddenly a whirl of wings made Marthe fall back, her hand at her throat: the bee, thinking he was attacked, sank his burning sword into her neck.

Marthe uttered a cry, a sort of rattle from the depths of her throat, badly closed by a gold palette. She started groaning, then mastered herself quickly, for the three sculptors in mud had risen to their feet. Mimi drew out the sting. Into Marthe's eyes came an expression far more terrible than tears of pain. I detected an inexplicable fright which made her breathe quickly, forgetting the sting of the bee. She started off trembling violently, ignoring us completely.

Then it was that Cross Eyes shouted the insult that Marthe knew only too well. I heard it at that moment for the first time—the insult that I was to hear for ten years. In spite of my resolve to conceal nothing, to write as if these words were not to see the light of day until after my death, I cannot put down that insult. Even if I were to burn the manuscript when I had come to the end, I could not write the word that dogged Marthe on all her walks. A vile insult, simpler even than harelip. To me it seems that all men, including the reader and myself, from the mere fact of our being men, are in a way responsible, that we share in the vileness which formulated those two words which for ten years were flung at a child. I am obliged to forgive these words. I shall not be accused of modesty, for elsewhere I am not at all restrained by a feeling of shame.

I have set myself to relate this story without rage, as an outsider, a spectator. . . .

Marthe went off, bowed toward the earth, as if her

heart in the middle of her body had been wrenched, drawing together the muscles of her stomach and breast, contracting the epigastrium to the breaking point, as a burnt hand closes painfully over its wound. It came to me that I saw her then for the first time; and since that day, this image, caught when she was being poignantly assaulted, remained the most persistent of all my desolating memories of her. Always pale, at that moment she was the color of white sand, glassy-white, with blue marks where the skin stretched over the bones of the face. She did not weep, but the whites of her eyes showed pink; the pupils had no luster and seemed to be made of a soft bluish stuff. Before following her, Mimi ran into the vegetable garden to deliver my mother's note. The ragamuffin with the red handkerchief seeing her running toward the gardener, his father, tried to catch her: to exact from her a promise of silence. But he proved too late; the gardener, after having put the letter in his pocket, thrashed the boy with his leather belt. We heard him howling for mercy; it was not he, the lad screamed, who had called the little girl names. The father applied himself all the more zealously to his task because he realized that he was soon going to be our neighbor, for he had leased the garden situated behind our house which furnished us with milk, butter, vegetables and poultry.

Contrite, as if she had been partly responsible for the wrong, Mimi came back to where I was standing. Marthe had forgotten us, and continued running. I was sunk in thought, stunned by problems too intricate for my years.

That cross-eyed boy, in what way was he different from Marthe? Of course Marthe was ugly. Where does this ugliness come from? Can't it be helped? Where was I to find answers to these questions? What did my mother think about it? My father? Didn't Marthe act as if she expected that insult? And other obscure thoughts.

She was henceforth a new sister to me, with a face that burned like a black star.

Marthe did not complain to our mother.

"Come here, children," she called out when we entered the house. She wanted us to meet M. and Mme. Napoleon de Toow and their daughter Gabrielle, a girl somewhat older than Marthe. After the scene we had just been through, I knew, as by a sudden intimation, what anguish my mother suffered when for the first time a stranger beheld her children—my disfigured sister and I, another variety of wretched creature, concerning whom she was filled with misgiving: that he would not be recognized for what she knew by instinct he would one day be.

Napoleon de Toow, the man-eating district attorney, was chatting with my father. My father occupied only a minor place in the history of Marthe's life, but I must indicate his cancelled position in our domestic life and show that while he had no direct influence upon us, his very neutrality, on occasions when a wise and strong gesture would have immeasurably lessened our mental agonies, had a disastrous effect. Both he and the district attorney can be described in a word: they belonged to the class of mediocre men, remarkable in no

outstanding trait. His vanity, growing out of the official position which he held, robbed M. de Toow, who was a man of no consequence even in our provincial society, of what little firmness was left to him by his wife and his cook, under whose tyranny he continually trembled. My father's vanity was less obvious, since he was not an ornament to the rank to which he had attained. He was one of those men of science devoted to experiment, who verify all the discoveries of chemistry and distill from this savorless task the quite unwarranted conclusion that they are very advanced—a lofty and flattering attitude of which they think they have a right to be proud. He sank himself, moreover, in the complex duties involved in organizing congresses of medicine and of microscopy. My father was blind to both the happiness and the sufferings around him. Since then I have known a number of scientists, sceptics who considered science as an art, a labor of love to be practised from day to day, real men, keenly alive, preferring the joys of life to those of art, those of the kitchen to those of the theatre. The other sort of scientists—the speculators—have a tendency to confound their labor with that of the saints, and pronounce the word progress as if it were a magic talisman. They are always talking about humanity but at bottom they are mean, stupid and insensitive. Some of them nurse delusions of grandeur; others are weak poltroons; many of them are dirty, ignorant of bathing and the pleasures of love, most of them early in life marry the daughter of their chief or of their concierge or a peasant wench. They function without imagination like animals.

In Napoleon de Toow's home the situation was perfectly clear from the male point of view. His wife was an enormous chunk of beef, fat to the bursting point, and black-bearded. Her wrists were as solid as concrete and she was strong in the matter of morals; her mind was constructed at right angles, unbroken by a single curve, nor by a single arc to let humor in; in brief, a stencilled mentality. Her daughter was irrevocably shaped like a pianola roll; she sprouted a blonde beard which intrigued me perversely, and shared with her mother the supreme power of the household. Her former nurse, now the cook, a fierce canteen woman, resembled a pyramid of red gourds, and she recognized no authority save these two bearded females.

Napoleon was small and puny. My father was of medium height, with a high forehead rather conical in shape, a thick nose typical of scientists who never think; he had blue eyes and a black beard.

V

"Mother, mother, there goes another traitor!" Marthe cried in a subdued voice. My mother stopped her reading, raised her head and caught a glimpse of a young priest through the window. This was at the period when ecclesiastics in Flanders and Brabant were called ravens on account of their black costumes and their supposed rapacity at the bedside of the dying. We had heard the words: treason, *traitre, prêtre;* the last two, coming close together so often on my father's lips that Marthe and I got them mixed.

A great fear seized us at the sight of a priest. We feared them in the same way that other children fear the Ogre. They wore long black gowns and yet they weren't women, and their wide-brimmed hats cast shadows over their eyes. They moved freely about the streets, nearly always formidably alone; when they were accompanied it was usually by one of those cross-eyed persons whom we had heard our father irately denounce as dangerous. They were black spectres, always visible, whereas the legendary Ogre (in spite of the hushings of fond mothers) does not go gadding about. Soft rubber travesties of men, assuming the colorless aspect of the humble, and then revenging themselves by inflicting martyrdom. We fancied them as trying to conceal their blood-stained hands as they came out of

innocent houses bearing away the wealth of the victims and fleeing with babies whom they baptized by a sort of operation. Baptism, of which we knew nothing, was an act of the blackest cruelty, perpetrated on the bodies of young children in a lonely spot, whence no cries could reach the ears of the parents. It is possible that at this time I confused baptism with a story about circumcision which had seemed most painful to me.

The height of our error was reached when we found out that priests carefully concealed a tonsure, the indelible mark of their guilt. The impression this tonsure left upon us was similar to that given us by Holy Sepulchres underneath country chapels, which spring up hideously out of the shadows to edify us concerning that most heinous of crimes yet committed by these sinister tonsured creatures, a permanent denunciation which it would be perilous to forget.

In my mind were somehow linked the words: ogre, tonsured priest, a convict with a number, and a red-hot iron.

During my childhood, and during a part of hers, Marthe and I, whenever we passed close to the house of one of these "ravens," felt the same anguish which other children felt when through carelessness they approached us in the town. To them we were "rascals" or "Jews," since we were not "Catholics." Two other children in our plight did not suffer as we did. Their father, chief surgeon at the hospital, being of peasant extraction, his son and daughter soon entered into intimate contact—perhaps a somewhat secretive intimacy—with the folk of Rupel. Moreover the whole town supplied the

hospital with provisions and all orders had to be approved by the chief. We alone, however, were molested with the cries of "rascals" and "Jews." Sometimes a more analytical spirit added "assassins" or "Judas."

My mother felt it her duty to take us along on a visit to M. Van Trier. To pay a visit to this merchant went against all her ideas of caste; but the fact that he was our landlord and our neighbor put him in a class apart from the other merchants of the town. Besides, he was not a "low huckster"—he had a profession; then too she felt that in this new environment which distilled all of its poison toward us we needed somebody of good standing in the community to lean upon. My father did not take the trouble to try to change the aristocratic conventions of his wife; because he belonged to the sacred phalanx of scientists and artists he considered himself on a higher plane—not because of his patents of nobility, which he bizarrely ranged with his university degrees.

My mother was an indolent woman with a drop of irony in her veins.

As soon as our parents had shown us about the garden, I rushed up toward the clayey hill where with eyes, ears and nose you could drink in savorous things which the light strained like a rain of curiosities. But the silence was suddenly submerged in cries, screamings which forced me to run back toward the garden. Shall I chronicle this without anger? And do I remember it without rancor? No!

Standing aside from the other children, not wishing to be overtly snubbed in a flagrant fashion which would

have called for reprisals on her part, Marthe had been watching a little girl of about four years who cried aloud with glee each time that a grown-up placed her on the back of a donkey, at that moment their favorite. Thinking that without spoiling the game for a moment, she would win the gratitude of the tiny girl, Marthe put aside her reserve and started in her turn to lift the child into the saddle. The little girl began to scream, and it was this outcry that made me run down the hill. The child went on howling, "Not her! Not her! I don't want her to do it!"

The Van Triers and my mother feared a serious accident. When they learned the truth, Madame Van Trier forced her daughter to play with Marthe. The landlord's daughter, a pupil at the Ursuline convent, was until then poised on a swing, neutral, not indulging in the games, as if expecting some unpleasant occurrence, unwilling to approve of the behavior of her friends, or to be at all responsible for it. With sly cleverness she managed an alibi; turning her back on the games she could be induced by no persuasion to bear witness, accuse or defend. She seemed to be counting one by one the drops of water that fell slowly from the wattles where the washed tobacco leaves were drying, or watching the large handles which moved the guillotine-knives that cut the dry leaves, brown with nicotine. Occasionally she exchanged some words with Antoinette, who was sewing, seated at the window which gave onto the Van Triers' garden. Antoinette, the sacristan's daughter, spent many afternoons at that window. From there she could see the flower borders of our garden,

and also command one half of the landscape visible from our windows—the vegetable garden with its stable and barn, and the boulevard with its big trees. Marthe's eyes were dry but she was inconsolable. Taking her hand in mine we went back up the hill. She quickly loosed her hand but continued to follow me.

We lay flat on our stomachs in the sage and heather. Service-trees and dog-roses above us covered the sky with thousands of sprays, red berries and leaves. At our left, emerging from the summit of the hill, were the impressive towers of the boulevard poplars, and a hedge of clematis and thorn, woven by summer. There was a scent of mint in flower. Under our faces spread the abrupt surface of the sand-bank, cut in half like a yellow cake. I watched the swallows coming and going, blue arrowheads vividly piercing the mass of sand; the entrance to each nest was marked by a trail of white dung; there were perhaps a hundred of them who were thus sheltered from their enemies.

Marthe lay motionless, her forehead on her arms, weeping without stirring, without drying her tears. I could not divert her from the pangs that were awakened in her heart, murmuring to welcome this new torment.

The voices of the children playing drifted to us from afar, the noise of the guillotines cutting tobacco, the whistle of a local steam tramway which carried sand from the Campine and peasants bringing their butter and eggs to market. Nearer, the sound of church-bells broke out into short peals, taking toll of the nuns who for the sake of "salvation" passed under the porches of the church. All of these veiled noises were bound up

with one another, melting together so that they reached us as a wind full of sounds one must carefully isolate; forming a velvet background for the silence which reigned close to us.

Among the brambles of the natural hedge I heard the first interruption of this stillness, as a drop of rain, suddenly loosened, is heard on the roof, a sound of leaves being crushed. I peered out and spied the Boy-with-the-Red-Handkerchief. He picked up a pebble as he advanced. I warned Marthe but she did not stir. I could not make out what he was muttering on account of the troubling barrier of the local idiom. Not being able to defend my motionless sister from the boy's animosity, I sought a compromise, pointing with my finger at a swallow's nest. Letting his pebble fall he came nearer. Marthe at once got up and moved away from the edge of the precipice. The boy leaned over better to observe the birds whose chirping flight sounded like a silken pinwheel.

Paler than her anemia had ever made her, with tears hidden in her dilated eyes, suddenly Marthe bounded toward us, her head bent low like a maddened goat, and she pushed the staring boy over the cliff. I do not wish to minimize the violence of this gesture of revolt which had long been brewing with her accumulated sorrows. Few readers are less apt than I at psychological analysis; they will explain, identify, condemn, and pin up the document.

Marthe moved away, painfully forcing her tremulous limbs to bear her up, to save her from collapse.

Her victim's knees and nose were bleeding. The sand

was as soft as bread dough and had broken his fall. His arm, which I slung through his handkerchief according to his instructions, rather alarmed me. In spite of the evil intent implied by the stone he had picked up, in spite of the rough handling to which he had just been submitted—this time not in the form of a paternal correction but as a sort of supplementary punishment—he did not seem to harbor any ill-will at that moment. Consoling him in French and in a few broken words of Flemish, I finally made him smile. He gathered that I was inviting him to come and see my goldfinches and even the big cave I had dug in our garden.

As he went off a priest stopped him, touched him on the shoulder, and solaced him with a few insulting allusions to "the unbelievers."

VI

This cave which I had mentioned to Marthe's victim I had laboriously dug in an unused path in the garden. It was closed by an arrangement of boards and shutters. The planks were covered over with earth so that the path above was reëstablished intact. The entrance between lavender bushes was further concealed by the wide-opened leaves of a palm, perennially green. Inside this cavern, which was about the size of a piano box, it was always cool in summer, and almost perfect darkness reigned. A single thin gleam of light slanted down on a niche in the wall of earth. This sometimes contained apples stolen from the orchard, carob-tree fruit bought at Mimi's shop, and sometimes raisins.

One day I made a new niche for my provisions and set up in the old one a little porcelain statue representing, I think, St. Roch. I had read Fabiola and other descriptions of the catacombs, yet I am sure that my fancy for crouching on dead ferns in this gloomy retreat was not the outcome of meditating on mystic themes. Perhaps there entered into it a little of what is called in English "secretiveness"; but perhaps even more was I urged into this mournful twilight by the sense of shame in which we lived, which killed in all of us the fibers of sociability, riddled our hearts with wounds, and made us wild to the point of hysteria. For what I

knew then of the affronts to which Marthe had been subjected, what I understood of the aggressive temper of the townspeople, had more than put a distance between them and me; it had given rise to periods of fierce repulsion. My heart seemed to be less feverish in this well where each tone of the bells came to me as softly as footsteps smothered in snow. Its walls, invisible companions, hugging my shoulders, shielded me from the bitterness of the light and formed a sort of egg within which I could at will imagine myself not yet born into the world where deceptions and the denial of the right to hope withered everything for us in advance.

It was like the desire to lean against a wall in the press of a crowd, at a concert or in the theatre.

Thence came to birth in me a sense of unfitness to participate in life under aspects which, it is commonly held, it should be seen. Learned men, giving a precise meaning to the word instinct, will assert that it was an instinct peculiar to my nature; others, inclined to be superstitious, having come to the end of the story, will say that the estrangement I then felt was a kind of foreshadowing. I merely recommend to both that they do not omit to take note of the guilt of the external world, namely Rupel. It was not so much the influence of environment as precocious experiences, such as I had been exposed to, that acted on my immature mind. Yet I myself am inclined to attribute a part of my taste for this pitch-dark cavern, for solitude peopled only by roots and insects as well as my feverish contempt for the games of the other children, to my own "nature," adding, however, that it would have been

impossible to have found a soil more congenial to its growth and more favorable to its unfolding into the consummate type than that of Rupel. Some other endowment at birth joined to more strength would have turned me into one of those anti-Christs which society denounces from time to time, driving them into a secret coalition, a potential force of honest men.

Posted at the window of my mother's boudoir, which was cut off from the rest of the house, I could watch the approach of the lad whom Marthe had shoved over the hill. He drew near. Noiselessly I opened the door and walking on my toes I led him toward the garden. It was important that no one should know that I was bribing our vegetable man's son into silence. As soon as we were well inside the garden I caught sight of my mother in the red salon which, following a custom of the period, owed its name to the hue of the hangings.

In order to withdraw from the range of her gaze, which she might at any moment cast toward the garden, I was forced to invite him down into my cave in spite of my intention not to keep the promise I had made him. Nobody save Marthe had ever gone down there.

"You need a candle," he suggested.

"No," I said, "because it wouldn't be quite the same thing."

"Why don't you get one?"

"Here are some nuts," I replied, without troubling about the irrelevancy of his question and my answer. He ate them greedily and then a handful of carob-husks which he didn't like so well. I liked their wild taste. It was no doubt a morbid and childish desire to mortify

myself that made me love that mashed straw, scarcely sweetened, more than succulent fruit.

After the husks had been chewed up, the darkness of my lair did not allure him with its austere charm as it did me, who found it enchanting; and he wanted to leave. He kept quiet, probably awaiting my signal. I did not budge from my haven of peace whither the stir of the outer world came to me dim and far-off.

Gently his hand began to caress my arm and in the thin glimmer of light which penetrated the cave he showed me his *petite bouilloire* in a state that frightened me, and manipulated it in order to initiate me. The result filled me with anguish. I thought then that I had an inkling of the awful mystery of priests.

"Is that baptism?" I asked. He did not at all understand what I meant but he replied with an affirmative nod of the head, indicating that his demonstration was to serve to guide me. Far too many barriers lay between further possibility of this sort of abandonment and the rest of my life, all parts of which were so completely separated from the lives of other people. Evidently it had nothing to do with baptism, for to put an end to my obstinacy he vouchsafed persuasive details and spoke to me of continuing the habit frequently; but that sort of thing existed no doubt only for the urchins who molested us in the streets.

He left me and tried to pull open the green door at the end of the garden, but it was closed; the key was hanging with the others in the pantry.

I got rid of him at last, my promise to show him my bird-cages having gone from my mind, as well as all

thought of my mother. Such then was my initiation into a practise to which both J.-J. Rousseau and Stendhal have confessed—the first drawing from it certain conclusions, a sort of lawyer's plea, a justification; and the other confessing it with the same brutal grace everywhere evident in the first part of his travel journal. A new document for the psychologists: this intermittent practise of my adolescence contributed in a measure, whether great or small I know not, to the formation of my anxious, nervous and bizarre character.

"Come here, Pierre," said my mother, when I came back from the door through which the Boy-with-the-Red-Handkerchief had just departed.

"What's the matter?" she asked, putting her face on a level with mine.

"Nothing, mother. But you yourself have been crying."

"Yes, I've been crying, but it's over now. Tell me what ails you."

"Nothing, mother," I repeated. The secret of the incident that had occurred near the beehives, and of the savage reprisal on the hill, of the gamin's visit, all these mysteries I shared with others. It was hard to disentangle offhand what parts belonged to me, what could be disturbed and detached without dragging along with it fragments that would bare layers of other parts, as in picking a wood-louse from a rose you can scarcely avoid rubbing off the crystal sheen of its texture. My mother drew me toward her knees. She was seated on the piano bench. She gazed at me a long space as she often did, uttering a "You're all right, then," which caused me

no feeling of remorse, because I felt, even though she were ignorant of the form and contour of my recent actions, she knew both their good and evil colors, the very essence that permeated them, and the obscure or luminous facets of my soul which may be said to have been compromised by them.

"Be good to Marthe," she urged me. "There she is in the garden. Go and join her."

I could not tender Marthe a rarer favor than to invite her to visit my dark cavern, knowing how odd my fondness for that theatre-box in the earth seemed to her. But, alas, this gift had just irrevocably lost the luster of its rigorous purity; a stranger had entered the cave, profaning its solitude. Ignorance had blasphemed the one splendor I was wont to exalt there.

"Yes. Right away!" she said, trembling all over, eager to accept my long-deferred offer.

"This way. There are five steps. Take care."

"Is there no light?" she asked. The enigma was more tantalizing than ever to her.

"None!"

"You can't do anything here," she concluded, seating herself on the earthen bank, her feet on the crackling fern that lined the bottom of the cave.

"I don't do anything," I returned.

"No doubt you think?"

"Yes, that's it, I think."

"What do you think of?" she asked, her voice like the gleam of her pupils, soft as velvet; the darkness deprived me of the rest of her face.

"Whatever one thinks," I said.

"As I do?"

"Maybe. You're too sad," I said, as though excusing myself for the thought she divined.

"Yes! But you're not like me. You can be looked at!"

"Our life's exactly alike here," I said, in the tone of an older person, capable of reason.

"Am I so very, very ugly?" she asked.

"I love you a lot," I quickly assured her, invoking the picture of her as she was on the day the bee had stung her. "You have very, very beautiful eyes," I added, at a loss for anything else to say, unable to find some gilded word of comfort.

"I am very, very ugly, Pierre, terribly ugly!"

"No," I cut in, at a loss.

"You remember, don't you," she began once more, hesitating, "how that horrible man, the hospital chief, placed me in profile for that photograph of all of us, which he took in the heather?"

"Yes, I remember."

"The look he gave his wife! I saw that he was appealing to her to help him."

Too dull a pedant to confront a difficult situation alone, he had advertised very plainly that he didn't want us to see his signal of distress!

"Do you think men are more stupid than women?"

"Here they're all stupid!" I cried out of the depths of my desolation.

"The people in Rupel are very, very stupid. Elsewhere, I am sure of it, it's different."

"Yes, as Aunt Julienne said two or three years ago,

a large town would have been more pleasant for us." Then Marthe said:

"With another aunt. Other people in the streets. Other children at school. Other walks. Everything otherwise, different." She ceased speaking. Above us, through the half-opened trap-door we surveyed the branches moving gently in the blue air like seaweed in calm water; we heard a finch alight, singing on the top of the pear-tree where his eggs were hidden. Presently the air was split up into tiny crumbs, each containing an atom of song. Marthe asked:

"What did mother say to you?"

"About what?"

"About me," she replied courageously.

"She said I was to be good to you, to take walks with you. You see, I've shown you my house," I said with playful spirit. Then having no scruple about lying, I said something flattering instead of advertising the pity which, in such a time as this, was bound to show its all too pardonable and natural presence in our wounded hearts.

"You are not yet very intelligent, Pierre," she said with naïve cruelty. "But why have you got that?" she asked suddenly, pointing to the niche of Saint Roch, discernible under the caress of a lean sliver of yellow light.

"It's pretty," I said, turning toward the statuette which, to me, was neither that of a saint nor of a pagan divinity.

"Only because it's pretty?"

"Yes, Marthe."

"Do you ever think about angels and saints?"

"No, I don't believe. . . ."

"Come, I am going to show you my room," Marthe cried, her access of confidence not yet exhausted. I felt that my Saint Roch had decided her and that she did not believe in my simple denial.

Marthe's room was as unfamiliar to me as my cistern had been to her up to that moment. On the landing there were only the two doors of my parents' rooms and that of the toilet, opposite Marthe's door. You saw at once what extreme care she took of her person and with what fond attention to detail she expressed her love of neatness and order. She had received permission to lay in front of her door, on the floor of the landing, a rectangle of black goatskin, whose long hairs flowed over the red cloth lining. No atom of dust crossed this frontier, shaggy as a grassy slope, placed between the rest of the house and her immaculate room. The walls were covered with a rose linen wainscoting as high as a man, interrupted by white furniture which, joined with snowy tulle at the windows, the dressing table and the bed, gave the room an air of floating in the center of a fragile cloud. I was carried away on one of those clouds on which Gentile da Fabriano sets a little virgin peasant; I was carried away inside a soap bubble, casting no shadow.

Marthe showed me the museum of all her "things," her cherished possessions—the inevitable sea shells gathered on various beaches, the lace which she busied herself making, her books. There were the books of her earliest years of passionate reading: Madame d'Aulnoy,

B

Madame de Murat, Mlle. de la Force; some English books which she looked through for the sake of the pictures; others more recent, among which *l'Education des Filles* by Fenélon was most precious to her. She showed it to me as a match for my poor Saint Roch, whom I did not know at all, having no inkling as to what saintliness consisted of. It was a small pretty edition dated 1762; I still possess the copy published at Porto, by Clamopin Durant, Grouteaux et Compagnie. I read:

"Conclude that we are here on earth only as travellers in an inn or living under a tent; that the body will perish; that you cannot put off your corruption save only by a few years; but the soul will fly aloft to that celestial home where it will share forever the life of God."

Near her bed in a corner hung a crucifix whose tired and rather dolorous air was known to me in engravings; and, finally, a string of carved beads which was called, she informed me, a rosary.

"Don't tell anybody you've seen this, Pierre," she cautioned me, and I gathered that she had intended to show me only her Fenélon. But since I had seen these pious objects, unique in our house, she did not scruple to show me her *Imitation.* She overwhelmed me with her confidence.

Did she draw from these books the meaning which their authors intended? And whence did they come into her hands? Even today I do not know, just as it is hard for me to unravel what took place within her, to what depths all this had sunk in her consciousness. She be-

lieved, I imagine, that she had discovered an isle of safety in the middle of our world which day by day, grew blacker and blacker in her sight, girt round by walls rising higher at every new appearance of frightful reality.

"Sit down, Pierre, near the window," and she added with bravado: "You see, I don't live like you in a dark cistern. I live in a white chapel surrounded and protected by angels' wings." Angels? All the demons of anguish and panic.

I gazed out at the box hedge. Just then the sound of Antoinette's harmonium escaped through the open window, and it occurred to me that it was she who had perhaps hypnotized Marthe into the path of disquietude revealed by the books I had just seen in the white varnished bookcase.

"Can you speak to Antoinette from here?"

"No," Marthe said. "Her French is very bad. She's going to leave for Mons where her aunts live. They are sort of lay sisters, Gabrielle told me."

"She's very well-educated, I think. . . ."

"She knows very little French, but at Mons they speak better than at Charleville and Bouillon. As well as in Touraine, father says. Do you know her?" Marthe added.

"No. She's so serious. She looks at us as if she knew us quite well . . . and liked us. . . ."

"Why don't you say what you've no doubt observed as well as I have?" Marthe broke in again. "She looks at us with pity in her eyes. It's true, isn't it?"

"No," I stammered slowly.

"God, I'm so miserable!" Marthe cried, and she hid her face in her hands.

Why did I not have the spirit to say that she seemed, indeed, to take pity on our forlornness, our separation from the church? But was such charitable cunning to be expected at my age? I am not a novelist who, warping the truth at need, offers you an apt solution to every problem, who can explain anything without batting an eyelash, with all the assurance of a marksman who sees only the bull's-eye in the center of the target. On the contrary, my criminal life having forced me to abandon all human respect, I ask questions shamelessly, knowing quite well that the majority of answers will be given by evil-minded imposters, by candid philosophers and by moralist clowns. In the present case the question was: Could a boy of ten have had an ingenious enough mind to think up a reply that would have reassured Marthe, made her believe that that pity was not addressed to herself, that it was only produced by the sight of her face, which nature, blaspheming like a child left alone without its guardian, had scarred—the jest of a capricious goddess ignorant of the human rights we confer on the individual?

From the outer ledge of the window, near a saucer filled with breadcrumbs, some sparrows had just flown away, frightened by my unusual presence.

"The bread is for them," murmured Marthe, assuaging with difficulty her pang of dismay. "Not for the others," she added, leaning forward to show me the chickens. Our cook, Christine, the only domestic the

intrigues of the confessional had left in our service, raised chickens in a plot fenced round by sheet-iron.

"There's some bread for you," she said, scattering toward the chickens the bread intended for the sparrows. They flocked together.

"Do you know why they're so healthy, Pierre?"

"I think I do," I replied.

"You won't tell?"

"No, of course not. I shan't tell anything you tell me."

"Never, never! Even if it were a matter of life——?"

"Never," I promised with energy, to wipe out the impression my stupidity had made on her that afternoon.

"Don't forget," she said, smiling at last. "But I don't insist on what I am going to tell you. I wanted to make you laugh, and all of a sudden I thought of making you promise. It isn't anything serious. There! Don't think of it any more." I regretted that I had to keep silent in the face of the gravity of this matter which, despite her last observation, I felt engulfing an obscure corner of my consciousness. I said with the affected indifference of a clown, a bad mimic, "Why are Christine's chickens so fat and healthy?" I even smiled. Marthe answered, imitating the attitude and voice of her doctor:

"The chickens owe their ruddy crests, their yellow claws and shining feathers to the excellence of the pills I give them; my silly pills against anemia which they gobble up; they also like the tonics which are brought to me at eleven o'clock every morning. Do I look like an

invalid?" she asked, as she uttered a shrill, dry laugh which ended in a rattle of her pitiful palate.

"No, no, Marthe, of course not. You are big and strong!" I cried. "But you should take your tonic even if you throw away the pills."

Vexed by the rattle in her throat and the sudden dwindling of her gaiety, her face assumed a pale smile: the look she then gave me was more than a hundred years old.

"Let's go back to the garden," I said. "I know every inch of it. There are a thousand things which you have not seen."

"You must not say anything!" she said, as if my silence had become not only the condition on which she accepted a turn in the garden, but—what is more—one which strengthened our love.

"You are going to take your tonics, I know," I answered, without noticing, in the disarray of my saddened mind, the crudeness of this sort of give-and-take.

"I'm not thinking about that any more."

"Of what then?"

"Of *The Imitation!*" she said in a low voice, as we stood on the landing.

"No, never, I'll never say anything," I said.

VII

My mother sent us to school quite late. Marthe could not hold out long against the cruelties her companions inflicted upon her. As for me, raging and taciturn, I did not solicit the love of that stinking herd. The slightest breeze of hostility sowed around me the powder of my hidden wrath; a stray look which may have contained the germ of a smile, or an ill-timed gesture, brought on an explosion.

Suddenly I found myself imprisoned between the four walls of a court surrounded by galleries, school buildings, the green crest of very ancient mulberry trees and the high buttresses of a church. It had the look of a ditch—not a dark pit hollowed in the earth, such as the one where I was wont to ruminate morosely, no! It was a ditch in which I was sealed up with a lot of urchins who seemed to possess the heads of the reptiles of my nightmares, those winged serpents and clawed batrachians who often made me cry out in the night as they swept across my vision like a marionette show. I recognized the greater part of these heads, so hideous to me. They were linked to moments of terror which Marthe had lived through. The impression they lashed into me mingled with the memory of palpitations caused by shouts of "Jews" and "assassin." Several of these dwarfed brutes grimaced a smile in order to cut loose in

cowardly fashion from the others who cast stones on the boulevard. Their shouts composed an inventory of all our childhood griefs, of injuries yet more terrible, of all the wounds that heal slowly and wither the blessing of hope.

They hurt me, yet feared that I would make complaint. Their masters, dull *farceurs*, were just as repugnant to me as they were. I knew the sordid houses in which they lived, but I was as yet unaware that they had not chosen them through their own predilection. These sons of notion-dealers, who cheated us at every turn, of peasants clad in blue blouses who displayed their vegetables in the market place, were on a par in my thought with the priests whose protégés they were. All these debasing circumstances, coupled with the fact that my father, somewhat unwisely, was in the habit of calling them low names, served to sharpen my lively disdain, at once haughty and maddened, which, clotting around the fresh emotions I amassed every day in the street, formed a leaven of hatred.

Made taciturn by the slightest disquieting look, possessing abnormal strength for my age, I inspired a respect of the wrong sort that was quite beneficial. They soon got a taste of my district-attorney injustice: all were sentenced in advance, irrevocably; not a single sin was absolved; I attacked on the slightest pretext, sparing myself neither scuffle nor ranged battle. I did not mix in their games; the least awkward collision made my fists fly out. At times, however, sheer disgust prevented me from beating up those who were just about ripe for it. The masters, peaceful citizens or fanatic despera-

does, respected me because I was a savage as well as because I was the son of a notable; otherwise they regarded me as a perfect idiot. I never replied to their questions. Once in the playground one of them, a boaster who wanted to show off, touched me. He was one of a group which was at the moment discussing my inexplicable rebellion, and he stretched out his arm to seize my shoulder, a gesture within the province of his job as monitor. He held me in spite of my angry protest. Finally I made him let me go by giving him a kick in the leg.

Real assaults, however, took place outside the school. Whether we walked with Fernand and Louise, the children of the head doctor at the hospital, or with the old cook, whenever Marthe and I came upon the children of our schools the hint of a smile was all the provocation I needed to hurl myself upon the smiler. Fernand and Louise willingly obeyed their parents' order to flee when these attacks began. On several occasions it was suggested to my father that he take me out of school. He forgot these visits of the superintendent immediately after his departure.

Those hours at school were the pure and concentrated essence of the atmosphere in which our life at Rupel was passed.

Less desolate days were those on which Marthe and I sauntered off together to taste the delights of truancy. Our enemies were locked up in their classes, where they were breathing chalk dust, leather rubbed with vitriol and smoke black. We sent the obedient Christine home again, precedent having convinced her that the

guilty ones would not be bothered; and indeed I don't remember a single punishment or warning, although sometimes we were *offered* advice! The liberty we stole with such intoxication on those days was, moreover, purer and more honest than the hours of imprisonment to which we denied our souls.

Marthe and I, seated on the edge of a quay, watching the boatloads of mussels drift along, heard the hours tolled in front of us from the belfry, and behind us, from the tower of the great church. Those happy sails we watched going by, floated all the way to the sea, and because of that the town seemed less closed in, and somehow lost its character of an immovable pot in which we were doomed to be ingloriously roasted by dirty plebians. Thus for years the sound of mussels being emptied into pails by fishermen quickened my heart. The peak of happiness would have been attained if we could have sailed off with those fishermen, floated far away in one of those heavy boats with red sails. Servants coming down the steps of the quay close to the boats, a pail in either hand, were no longer mere slaveys; they became young damsels aureoled with happiness whom we never ceased to envy. This exotic spectacle inspired us and kept alive in us a taste for fish, for mussels boiled with celery, onions, pepper, a clove of garlic and other spicy herbs, which are violin arpeggios in the melody of the kitchen.

At other times we made for the meadows. Marthe carried a gourd and some biscuits. On my back hung the great "vasculum" belonging to my father; Christine helped us, loaded in this fashion, to get out of the

house secretly. Christine was our defender on many occasions. She protected us from other servants who passed through the house, staying one, two or perhaps six months, varying with the time necessary for the priests to lure them out of the accursed dwelling. The first effects of the threats of the confessional doctors showed themselves in the ingenious cruelty these servants applied to us. When I was away from home Christine had to watch my bird-lime and my caged drones. She also protected us in the street and acted as our confidante and oracle. Our sure refuge in many turns of fortune, she seemed to be completely immune to the hypocritical, tortuous and even violent counsel of the priests. A fault, it seemed to me, which had damned her in their eyes far more than her sojourn with atheists could have done.

Christine set aside some of the days of our somber childhood and filled them with pleasant little stars that still burn today with a joy undimmed by the black clouds of all our bankruptcies and frustrations.

The confused tumult of the school went against all my tastes. I have remarked that I was never for a moment attentive. Had I been docile I should in any case have made little progress, my memory being not only weak, but it seems to me that I had less of it than today when discipline, which I then lacked, has corrected it, bringing some partial cure to this malady of the brain. However, I have always lacked a good memory, a thing which Plato admired as a god, and which Balzac regarded as one of the three or four qualities necessary

to the artist, that is, to the man whose gestures of consciousness are worthy to arrest curiosity.

Is this perhaps one of the reasons for my failure? Has not La Rochefoucauld said that he had no memory, and did not Montaigne also lack it?

Alas, Pierre Bioulx d'Ardennes lived with more silent passion than with wisdom. Less underground, unused passion, more reason and moderation would have put greater sanity into the atmosphere in which, despite himself, he was kept prisoner.

VIII

At about this epoch certain conclaves took place at the door of our house just before the morning session ended. Honorée, Gaga and Marthe, whispering on the threshold, had had to leave school before the official closing hour. The mission of the two elder girls was to lead the youngest back to her parents. She was weeping, but forced herself to be calm at the hurried injunctions of her escorts. They did not pass the window of my mother's boudoir, and when Marthe, having courageously dried her eyes, darted toward the door, her guides disappeared, relieved, almost running; Marthe touched the knocker very lightly. If Christine was herself unable to answer this signal of distress which was tacitly used, she would send someone to open the door very cautiously. But if other noises prevented her from hearing the light tap-tap of the hammer, Marthe made a tour around the landlord's house and came up to the big green door at the end of our garden. She kicked the door with her little foot and Christine, sure that some new grief gnawed at Marthe's heart, ran for the heavy key hanging in the pantry and opened the swinging doors.

At other times when these older girls were not to be found, hiding because they considered the mission too compromising, Marthe came home escorted by Mimi,

for whose schooling some gentleman was paying, people said. The little dark-skinned girl with kinky hair and eyes with metallic glints in them, known to us as Scarab, usually came with them. These children, less careful of their reputation or of proper behavior, bestowed upon Marthe their complete loyalty, a reverent and natural loyalty. In spite of—or perhaps because of—the immoral mischievousness of Mimi, her company was more comforting than that of Honorée who persuaded my sister to exaggerate her wrongs. Marthe, therefore, often attached herself to these children of the poor during these homecomings which usually left her gasping with anguish; my mother, surmising how soothing their presence was to Marthe, did nothing to sever the bond between companions so ill-assorted.

Marthe disclosed nothing of the annoyances that lacerated her heart. Although my mother questioned her about her inflamed eyes I think she was afraid to go more deeply into the tragedy which, she divined, was making school a martyrdom for Marthe. Marthe remained mute, and only her tears bore witness to her continued grief. Perhaps my mother hoped that the inquisitors would weary of their sport. And when at last she abandoned hope it was she, instead of Marthe, who went to school one morning.

Although she was young and pretty the looks and behavior of the children greeted her as the mother of their priceless laughing-stock; from the moment when she entered the office of the directress she heard their whispering begin behind her.

"I have been expecting you, madam!" the directress said.

"You were expecting me?"

"I have ended the incident happily." My mother's astonishment troubled the teacher, and she added:

"I have pacified the parents of the little girl." But it was impossible to draw out of her anything save the most confused explanations. She did not wish to tell what had happened, once she saw that my mother was completely ignorant of the incident.

Quitting the directress, my mother came to fetch me at the door of my school, having more need to see me, she assured me afterward, than to speak of her visit to my father who would, apropos of the occurrence, launch into philosophical considerations, clothed in the barren rhetoric of the Sorbonne, and never utter so much as a single word of native tenderness, nor yet express an honest opinion of our trials; finally, after many trite assertions, he delivered himself of generalities which cultivated men without genius pride themselves on.

"Let's not go through the center of the town," my mother said to me.

"Nor past the cemetery where the dogs bark," I replied.

"Marthe is not going to school any more, Pierre," she said, after she had avoided in silence the greensward with its untidy graves and bone dust.

"Do you know . . . mother . . . ?"

"Do you know what they've done to her?" my mother asked.

"No, but I can guess."

"Is it something dreadful?"

"I don't know exactly, but everything that's wicked." Then I was silent, imagining that Marthe's school was a hell even darker than mine. As was my habit, I concealed my thoughts and said:

"What about me, mother?"

"You will still go to school, Pierre," and as I said nothing, she added: "Are you afraid?"

I laughed with a bitterness that was intended to be ferocious.

"Do they still fight with you?" she asked, catching the sombre smile under my tremulous eyelashes. I nodded my head.

"Good!" And it was right of her to encourage me. The fist reigns both in the real and in the imaginary world. We must have armies of generals and fighters, venomous aviators, and at school aggressive fists.

My mother, not wishing to return home, went back along the street, visiting several shops; as she was afraid of boring me, she sent me ahead along the boulevard where she would pick me up on her way home.

At the very outset of my walk I was approached by Mimi and her inseparable Scarab. For a long time I had not spoken to Mimi, but today I hypocritically said "Hello" to them, having already in some hidden recess of my mind formed the plan of questioning them.

"What happened at school?" I asked at once. Without replying they fell into step beside me, one on the left and the other on the right, like horses on both sides of a wagon tongue. Their bodies grazed mine, and their glances were glued on me as if they were intent on

counting the number of my eyelashes. I have never been under a scrutiny more uniquely perverse. Two ardent young females were auscultating me with their searching gaze. I was composed of other stuff, rarer, finer, than the boys who were their lovers according to the caprice of the day. In spite of my absorbed air I seemed to them an appetizing mystery. The black eyes of Scarab shone impetuously, seeming to study me with the curiosity of a dog waiting for a friendly gesture. She deliberately seized my hand, which the other girl, in spite of her inveterate impudence, did not dare to do, fearing to offend me. She was less ignorant and more refined in her depravity than Scarab. Mimi's blue eyes went through me like something warm: their play was harder to guess at than that of a new hand at cards; they seemed to be more variable than Scarab's because the flutterings of the pupil are more apparent in the blue iris, and this blue changes in density and color.

They walked along in prudent silence, as if a word would have put an end to their pleasure; they framed me with their watchful attention, like two gendarmes, who having captured a picturesque drunkard, tie his hands behind his back. I was a sort of prey they would give up only at the last extremity. Moreover, they would not reply to my question.

Seeing Fernand coming, I hastened to ask my companions for the last time what had happened at Marthe's school.

They had made a pact with Marthe and would divulge nothing.

Fernand, seeing me with these little girls of the

B

common people, wore the sidewise smirk of a dog. I say of a dog, not of a precocious little boy, who experiences a sort of faintly voluptuous dream in which women are scarcely more real than the pictures in fairy-tale books. No, it was the smile of a vicious dog, of a filthy boy who masterbates while he sucks bonbons. And from this combination, doubly disorganizing, there persists in his mind a flippancy concerning sexual love, which makes his life a blasphemy in the eyes of poets who have created love to rescue us both from the morose stupors of lupanars and the grossness of our vast factory for the production of children.

In spite of the repulsion I felt, as soon as the little girls had gone I asked Fernand what it was they had refused to tell me. We had come to the top of the butte of yellow sand; through an opening in the natural hedge—the one the Boy-with-the-Red-Handkerchief had passed through the day when Marthe pushed him over the cliff—we climbed the hill. At the top the light was so clear that the villages of the plain were visible between columns of poplars, and in front of us the most minute details of the rear walls of houses, ours, that of our landlord, and, in the foreground that of the sacristan, whose roof seemed to be a continuation of the church of Sainte Clotilde.

"Marthe wanted to kill Lisette," he answered. It was the reply of the coward who always fled away from my battles.

"Explain," I said, without showing any disgust.

"Just that! she provokes everybody!"

"Like me," I asked.

"Every single day," he said, avoiding the question.

"But Lisette isn't dead?" I demanded, repressing the desire to thrash him.

"Her skull was almost broken in . . . with a slate," he said, and looking toward the north he suddenly added: "What's that over there?"

It seemed to be a black mountain that grew larger, filling the whole horizon. But I had not finished with Fernand. I was determined to get more out of him.

"Tell me how it happened!"

"Certainly you know what they do, what they say?"

"Tell me!" I said belligerently, as one coachman might threaten another.

"They go through the pantomime of cutting off her nose with their work scissors. . . ."

"And they flatten their noses with their fingers. . . ."

"Is that all?" I cried, in a still more threatening tone.

"Then she was called on to recite, and all the pupils accompanied her, murmuring——"

"Imitating her voice, weren't they?"

"Yes!" he said, more at ease now, less afraid of me as the butte became peopled with a crowd that had flocked there to watch the black mountain grow larger until it seemed a monstrous cabbage.

"But when did she hit her?" I insisted, ready to undermine his assurance that he was out of danger.

"The mistress had soothed Marthe with kind words, and everything seemed over."

"Then?"

"Lisette generously whispered a word that Marthe

had forgotten in her recitation. Then with all her force she struck at that poor girl's head."

We stood silent. More than a hundred people had gathered by now; they had gotten wind that an immense powder mill had exploded. They were speculating on the cost of the damages and the number of the dead. I spied the sacristan and his daughter among the throng. No longer afraid of me in the midst of the crowd, not a single member of which was friendly toward me, Fernand pointed out Antoinette.

"Your pretty neighbor. She's rather clever. She makes fun of you, I am sure. She knows you are *par trop bête.*" I was still thinking of Marthe's gesture of despair, her frenzy of revolt. I asked Fernand:

"Can you figure out why Marthe struck that blow?"

"You're all savages!" he cried, lifting his voice so that all might hear. A punch sent him rolling among the thorns and brambles. Picking himself up he lingered behind and, ready to flee instantly, articulated distinctly:

"Spawn of Flibbertigibbet! All you need is to be cross-eyed!"

I did not bother to pursue him, once more intrigued by the strange word that issued from those lips normally lacking all imagination, remembering that he had already given my father that withering name, half-capricious and half-sinister.

The watchers were now moving away, having seen the huge black cabbage attain its greatest size. When the little mountain was again restored to its wonted solitude, Marthe, who had observed me from her win-

dow, came out to share the sight. I saw her from a distance, coming forward, fine and light, with something animal in her gait, the gait of a soft-footed dreaming young field-beast.

When she was near at hand, I turned my eyes away.

She was less sad today, and she even started talking to a young girl, a little older than I. We formed a little group. Fernand had deftly escaped, following in the wake of the crowd. The young girl had a dark skin and was very pleasant to look at. Marthe had once spoken to me of her and I divined that she was very fond of her.

"You ought to like each other," she said, looking from me to the girl.

"I'm quite willing," I replied. And this flirtation lasted three whole days, ending suddenly when the young girl, made bold by the frankness of our exchange of vows, wrote me a conventional note in which she treated me as an equal. I do not know whether it was pride or dread of being evicted from my solitude, of losing my tortoise- or snail-like habits, that made me hold back with a grotesque and unjustified haughtiness. Yet this love lasted two days longer than another, decided in similar fashion by Marthe. Again I said, "I'm willing," without feeling the slightest emotion in my heart.

In the latter affair the first duty that was imposed on me was to swing Louise, my sweetheart, in the rustic swing, which happened to be the scene of our pact. Presently she wanted to kiss me, and succeeded to my own surprise, a surprise not due to ignorance, but to

the inexorable boldness of the gesture which to my mind —then vitiated by wrathful rebellion—was the essence of divine music. I decided that Louise deserved to be Fernand's sister; and thus another flirtation, born of Marthe's sense of curiosity, was over.

After Marthe was withdrawn from school my father often took her with him on his trips to Bouillon, at the suggestion of my mother. They would leave in the morning and return at night. Marthe was happy at the outset, but quickly allowed herself to fall back into the melancholy which Rupel bred in us, saying that she didn't want to leave except forever. During one of these trips our father had a conference with our Charleville and Bouillon relatives at a notary's, for what reason I do not know. The women stayed at the hotel with Marthe. I gathered that they had spoken to Marthe of her early years in that town, and from their talk she had gleaned new reasons for being sad.

I surmised one of the topics of their conversation one day when, as I was coming down from my room on the floor above, she opened her door, and beckoned to me silently, with that look of mystery mixed with terror which more and more altered the expression of her face, ravaged by one of those demons with which nature is peopled to offset the angels invented by man.

Mutely she drew me to her window. The summer was at its solstice, the sky enchanting, stirred by horizontal eddies of heat. In the wide expanse of the vegetable garden, Cross Eyes and the Boy-with-the-Red-Handkerchief were helping to fill wheelbarrows with vegetables. There were no sounds save that of the guillotines

cutting tobacco at our landlord's and the busy clucking of the hens under the window where we stood.

Since the day when I was shown about her room for the first time, Marthe had grown a good deal thinner; her face was more tortured, more harelike. It was as if a veil of disquietude had been drawn over her features; she was terrified by shadows and went through the sad round of her life as one makes one's way through a perilous wood where at any moment a monster or a cry may leap out. I cannot but call this state of mind the madness of persecution: certainly she was being persecuted, harassed, lacerated with hellish perseverance, similar to the onslaught of the elements against which we defend our lives in vain.

Opposite us Antoinette opened her window and withdrew at once.

"You know that she's leaving for Mons, to stay with her aunts?" Marthe inquired with an abstracted air.

"Somebody told you that?"

"Why, yes," she said. "I believe she's going to become a nun."

"A novice?" I asked.

"A nun, of course!" she replied.

"Why do you think so?"

"But it's beautiful, Pierre. Don't you know that you see nobody in a convent, and you're taught never to think—at least so I'm told."

I felt that she had called me into her room simply to tell me that. Apparently she had made up her mind not to add another word, and she waited for me to leave. I asked to see her new books, and we remained standing

while she showed them to me. I was about to go away. With her fingers on the door-knob she said:

"Did you know, Pierre, that I had been baptized?"

I did not answer.

"At Charleville, shortly after I was born," she said, her voice assuming a tone of bravado, of defiance, of provocation.

"By whom?" I asked.

"No matter! I'll tell you . . . our grandparents. . . . Don't tell anybody," she added with queer satisfaction at having bared this secret to me, as though she had persuaded herself that to tell it at once gave more efficacy and more authenticity to this particular sacrament.

IX

In those days a sort of languor sapped Marthe's strength. She complained of sleepless nights during which she was haunted by the memory of everybody she had ever met. People came alone or in groups, deceitfully offering her comfort, sneering at her behind their perfidious smiles; sometimes they would suddenly cease calling her horrible names and begin to compliment her infamously. When she slept her dreams were even more distracted than these half-dreams; she was then despoiled by repulsive hands, derided by the hunchbacked and the cross-eyed, tormented in every possible way by the children of the town; often she dreamed that she had been beaten, and woke up with hot tears of shame streaming down her cheeks.

The red-haired doctor made out prescriptions for the chemist to fill and my father manifested some concern for Marthe, chiefly to check up on certain theories held by French and German scientists. This puerile tendency, in spite of his conservatism typical of the vain man, caused him to adopt several new theories which he applied, often with a total neglect of the special circumstances of the case. He wanted to have her room continually flooded with intense light and, in accordance with new ideas which had lately come from England to the continent, he ordered the window to be

kept always open. The other doctor held different ideas, but since my father entertained a well-founded and unshakable contempt for him, Marthe's bed was placed near the window which was open day and night. From her bed Marthe could go on feeding the sparrows.

Remembering the fate of the pills for anemia I mounted to the second floor of the house to my father's study next to my own room. I knocked at his door and went in.

"I want to tell you a secret, father. You won't tell anybody else?"

"Yes, of course. But why speak of anybody else? Who, for instance?"

"I want to tell you something about Marthe," I murmured, disconcerted by the immense advantage he enjoyed, being a man who was unable to conceive that there could be anybody else in comparison with himself.

"Marthe has never taken her pills for anemia."

"That's good. But, after all, they were harmless. She could have taken them without danger," my father said, smiling like a devil without an iota of individual talent.

"She throws them to the hens," I added. My father laughed frankly, putting aside the gravity of the scientist, as he would have laughed at a piece of clowning provided there were no onlookers.

"Good! Pierre, I think you're a little fool. Now run along."

I left, gathering up enough courage to say:

"She might throw all her medicines to the chickens."

"Now go," he said laughing, gazing at me as if I were a confirmed idiot. The laugh died off and I heard him say: "Ah, my dear colleague, you are only dosing up the hens!"

Quivering with shame, with disgust, filled with loathing for myself, I went at once to Marthe's room and confessed my breach of faith. She sat up in her bed and crimsoned terribly. I could not make out her first words. Her body was contorted with the rage that flooded her being. Coward, traitor, hypocrite, a boy without honor. . . .

"I don't want to see you any more!" she cried, beside herself, sustained by her scorn. "Never! Never!"

Since the day the bee had stung her and I had surprised a look of extreme anguish in her face, I had never been as troubled as now, and this time my grief was increased by the feeling that I had failed her.

"I thought you meant the secret of the books," I said, only partially lying.

"Hypocrite," she repeated with a moan touched with hysteria. "All my life long I'll have nothing to do with you!"

My mother rushed upstairs, frightened. I did not utter a word, obeying the occult power of silence that made our house somber.

Once during the desolate hours of the night she had a paroxysm. She awakened to find herself in a room with ruddy, blood-stained hangings and curtains. She sat up and leapt out of bed. Her hands and nightgown were crimson. A bell started pealing loudly. She advanced, quaking all over, the muscles of her body soft-

ening and distending. She opened the door but paused on the dark landing, standing on the goat-skin rug. Swooning, losing control of her bowels, she gave a cry of shame that launched her beyond the dream. She screamed, like a beast of prey, tracked down and riddled with wounds.

As her screaming died with a rattle in her throat, Christine came downstairs, having seen the same glow redden the sky and her room. I too was awakened by the tocsin of alarm and the bright flare, and I followed Christine who took possession of the black rug and vanished. My mother had been aroused and ran to Marthe who, in a cold sweat, was put back to bed. Her condition on the following day was such that we thought she had had a fit of madness.

With her mania for order, Marthe was as humiliated as though she had committed some horrible crime, a crime emanating from within herself and no longer connected with her ugliness. Marthe refused to see any of us for several days, not even her mother nor the doctor. Christine alone was allowed to come near her bed.

If you have lived, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in a sea-port with warehouses stocked with wood, cotton, grain and reservoirs of oil, you get used to magnificent fires, particularly splendid if the strikers have set the stage well. The amaranthine petrol flames, russet at the base, thick and rampant, flowing like lava while they burn, are most imposing, while fires of wood are more spiritual. The flames that had awakened us that night were of the latter sort; the

entire supply of dry wood belonging to the brush manufacturer near by, together with the finished product had caught fire. The structure, braced by the sacristan's house, resembled a gigantic lantern. Thorough in its work, the fire flooded every window and climbed majestically above the walls. The roof had caved in as soon as the fire broke out.

I took my place in the chain that passed pails of water from hand to hand toward the pumps. The cries that had at first spread over the town had quieted now. Through the clamor of alarm bells you could catch nothing more than a dim murmur, as if the onlookers and those who formed the chain feared that their breath, massing itself, would feed the flame, which climbed thickly up in the midst of our silence, topped with a heavy mantle of black smoke, and broken here and there by plumes of vapor resembling ostrich tufts quickly withdrawn lest they catch on fire.

At a window a woman moaned in a distressing voice, worn thin by fatigue. She continued her groaning as though she believed that if it were our duty to keep the chain it was hers, as a suffering pregnant woman, to groan over the sudden conflagration, this volcano gashed by hell.

The District Attorney ordered a policeman to shut the woman up. The Police Commissioner made a number of arrests, but the fire was not got under control. On the contrary, the sacristan's house was gutted of its furniture, long flames licking the front wall. Antoinette's room was roughly invaded by an acrid cloud of smoke.

Antoinette was removed from the house in a dead faint. As they carried her past the chain of men she came to and smiling shyly, turned her head away. Seeing me among the men, with a big bucket swinging through my hands every second, she smiled again: and it seemed that she thought both of us equally absurd.

I did not see Antoinette again for several years.

Marthe remained for a long time in a stupor brought on by anger and confused humiliation, during which time she refused to see us. I say us, although for several weeks now, I had been banished from her presence.

X

Julienne St. Albans, our aunt, had chosen the period of Marthe's illness for a gathering of her friends' children. This unhappy woman had undeniably suffered by being the sister of Marthe's mother; it was an intolerable and well-nigh improper situation. She invited a charming group of friends. They would not be forced to meet "the disfigured girl."

My younger sister Sylvia and I were strangely shocked to see a curé, a real curé, clad in a big black robe! A bit later another one came. With an air of gravity, evidently premeditated, Julienne hastened to the side of this late-comer, who had a long pale face and very broad shoulders, the sort of man who probably practised his religion with his fists, which is no worse than the fashion of practising it by allegories and jesuitical parables. The careful hostess left him shortly afterward and approaching my mother said to her furtively:

"You see, in a small town you have to compromise and entertain honest folk of all colors, of all parties." Somewhat disgusted, my mother drew her toward a corner of the salon, whence she cast her eyes around the room for several moments.

"Julienne, do you go to church on Sundays?"

"Yes! On account of the servants. . . ." Julienne

returned softly. My mother moved toward the district attorney, Napoleon de Toow, who was speaking very seriously with uplifted finger and eyebrows raised as in a Hogarth engraving—inevitably seeking approbation —to an old gentleman with gray side-whiskers, apparently the father of the young man who accompanied him: one of those glorious heroes who billet their nonentity in a military career. These two continued to talk together while my mother spoke to the attorney.

"Then it is certain," my mother said, "that I could rent a plot in the cemetery?"

"Of course, Madam. All of our cemeteries are the property of the community nowadays."

"The rectangle at the side of the cemetery, surrounded by that brick wall . . . with a special entrance on the main road . . ." said my mother, a little hesitantly.

"The place called the cemetery for dogs?" inquired the official, smiling. Yes, that was it. Napoleon de Toow replied with just a hint of protective irony that there was no cause at all for alarm, and so on.

"But the people themselves show such hostility! Only two criminals are needed to dig up a corpse!"

"What an idea, Madam! Allow me to say that you are entertaining the most fantastic dreams. Absolutely impossible."

"Such things have been known to happen," replied my mother timidly.

"We live in a civilized country, Madam, and I venture to remind you that if there are any such criminals as you imagine, it would be myself—my loyalty in the

service of the king consists in keeping this town pure of all stain, moral or otherwise."

My mother, shaken in spite of having had her fears allayed, led me over to one of the three high windows of the house. She wanted to distract me, but she was drawn off almost at once to join a group.

While watching the graceful skaters tracing intricate curves, I drew a number of conclusions from what I had just heard. It seemed to me that my mother felt certain that Marthe was going to die soon, and she feared the wickedness of Rupel. She believed that there were persons who would be bold enough to violate a grave, carrying off the corpse from the cemetery to some unconsecrated spot where there was not a single tomb. She could not be thinking of Anne, her third daughter, born three years before, although she was frail and seemed destined to die young.

By the same chain of thought I reverted to Marthe. We had been together one evening before our quarrel, in the cemetery stretching along the road which led to L.; a huge rectangle of ground where, instead of trees, the dead were planted. One of the corners, like the last square on a checkerboard, was closed in by dismal walls and overrun by high, wild grasses. The immense gateway seemed impossible to open, so heavy it was, so covered with spider-webs, and dead leaves caught in the spider-webs, and rust as thick as the bark of a cork-oak. Around this gateway clustered old wives' tales; behind its rusty veil outcasts, Jews, scoundrels, suicides, all sorts of damned folk were buried.

I had come out of the church with a load of guilt

upon my heart which passing the cemeteries made heavier, increasing the sense of dismay which I could not confess to Marthe. I blamed myself for a great betrayal. This was the second time I had seen the interior of a church, the mournful house of the priests! The first time had also been in Marthe's company when, with wavering hearts, we had entered the church of Sainte Clotilde, whose steeple could be seen from her window, above the Sacristan's house. The church was empty, pervaded by a pungent gray vapor, and sonorous as a thunderbolt. Since she did not go to church any oftener than I did Marthe made no headway along the religious path that tempted her. I have heard it said that it is necessary to aspire to the grace of revelation, to await the coming of faith in a pure state of soul. Was Marthe doing what was prescribed for those who wish to turn their bodies into the glorious vessel of God?

Among the group of adults a tall man about thirty years old riveted my attention. It was Monsieur Colen who with his red-rimmed eyes persistently stared at his wife standing apart with a group of women near one of the windows. His gaze wandered toward the skaters who had increased in number, then toward Louise's legs, Louise who was laughing at Sylvia's caprices.

Madame Colen was shorter than I was; her body was round and graceful; she had charming wrists and ankles; her well-shaped arms and legs lacked the useless heaviness which is so voluptuous in young bodies. Yet they were not marred by that frivolousness of line which at first blush suppresses all possibility of hidden emo-

tion, meanings usually derived from a barbarian or intricate style. Hers was one of those bodies accounted spiritual, without being ethereal in the least. A pretty young woman, not too lean, a medieval type rather than a figure depicted by Lamartine or by recent idealistic painters. Her face was inclined to roundness yet was not fat, with a nose that approached the aquiline; her hazel eyes were salient by virtue of superb eyebrows drawn by a vivid unwavering pencil, not crudely tufted with hair as were the eyebrows of our neighbors, whom we suspected of still being in the animal stage; magnificent dark brown hair full of magic. A dimple in her chin offered an unexpected contrast with the mouth curved inward by brooding ever since she came to Rupel. Her hands were so thin it seemed they could scarcely cover her cheeks. Her narrow foot was arched like that of a Roman matron. I have already said that her ankles were slender. A young woman from Auvergne who had never met a lady might see the Madonna appear, fresh and wholesome, in a vision such as Madame Colen presented. I do not know where she came from. Young and pretty as she was, she aroused more scandal than my mother did, for Colen, a rich man, had gone in search of this woman outside of Rupel where twenty girls "just as pretty and just as well-provided for" would have been glad to accept the wholesale merchant.

I did not hear all the talk, but I turned an ear to what Julienne St. Albans was saying, almost in an aside, to my mother, who had wearily confided to her some of her troubles.

"I warned you. A large town. . . . But I think you

exaggerate. . . . Besides you could have left her behind."

"That would have made a difference, of course. But it couldn't have killed what he feels in his heart for her!" Then Julienne said some odious words concerning guilt, like people who expected our sorrow to cease once they had disclosed its origin and the person who caused it.

My contemplations were interrupted by Honorée, who was gathering together the younger guests. The party dresses of the little girls did not permit us to play the games with any very considerable enthusiasm; a game of hide-and-seek lasted long enough for me to suggest to Elodie, a friend of Gaga's, that she might hide in a provision-closet. She got in; I turned the key; no one could find her. We went back to the drawing-room, and the young girls passed little cakes and tea.

The landlord was leaving. While he and his wife and daughter were being bowed out, the red and gold sleigh, drawn by two horses, stopped under the windows of the first salon where some twenty persons still stayed on. The sleigh pulled off with a carillon of bells, sounding like a sudden spurt of water on the asphalt from a sprinkling wagon in summer. It scarcely had time to make the trip back and forth when it reappeared before the door. The Diver, seated near a window made an awkward movement. His rosy face grew pale; behind his glasses his bewildered gaze sought out his wife who sat with inclined attentiveness near the fireplace. The shock produced by the Major fixing his wolfish eye on the face of that lady escaped nobody. They then went

to the source and all tried to catch a glimpse of the sleigh; and thwarted in this, they turned their gaze on the entrance to the salon. Several seconds were shelled like peas in an undisguised silence, indiscreet and provincial.

The door was opened by an apparition enveloped in a black fur coat. Julienne, quite sincerely this time, made for Honorée whose hand she took in her own. The new arrival stood motionless on the threshold, recognized by everybody; a grotto-like chill suddenly invaded the room; it was as if she had suddenly opened a cupboard and revealed some intimate toilette article. None of these rational human beings moved to greet the creature, or made a sign as of one living being to another: slow-wittedness being a trait of moral skinflints, unable as they are to gauge the forms and dimensions by which one yields quickly, with the justice of common sense, to generosity, unexpectedly appealed to.

Marthe fainted as my mother clasped her in her arms. Then a cross-current stirred in the heavy mass, it stirred and lifted itself up, relieved. The less thick-witted helped my mother bear the unhappy girl into another room. My mother forbade us to follow her. Sylvia was weeping. I was primed to beat the first ugly mug who got out a bottle of soothing syrup and spooned out a dose of noble comforting words. But they whispered to each other, and neither addressed nor looked at me. I surmised that they were telling Antoinette's two old aunts about us: Marthe was a young girl of about sixteen, Pierre a lamb full of gall, and Sylvia, an incredibly spoiled child.

The Sacristan did not mingle in the upper-class circles of Rupel, but his two sisters, Antoinette's aunts, real "bourgeois," owned "one of the big fortunes of Mons," and bore visible signs of an aristocratic and religious tradition. Moreover they were not stopping with their brother, but "on the contrary," with the dean of our principal church, the tall athletic man who had brought them to my aunt Julienne's. And since they had made their appearance in Rupel to spend the three days of the religious festival, the Sacristan was suspected of the terrible crime of having ruined himself: of having played the devil off in some big town. Besides, they remembered, since the highly respectable sisters had come into their midst, that they had always pitied that poor man, so thin and yellow, so devoted to his work because he had a good job.

His sisters: not less thin nor less yellow, were taller than he. One was as tall as the curé; her head was wound round by bluish-gray hair and her mouth seemed to have been worn thin by the continual flow of prayers; her eyes were lowered but brilliant under darkened lids. Both of these storks of the same brood had long noses, turned up at the end, square foreheads, and wilful chins. They were bigots who even tyrannized over the priests; their knowledge and their energy caused them to be hearkened to as much as their wealth. The elder blamed the younger for her vaguely literary tastes. It was known at Rupel that these two women were about to drive Antoinette into a way of life whose logical end was the convent. But, who knows, perhaps Antoinette would come back, and since she was the sole

heiress of these high-minded aunts, Rupel could not afford to neglect these severe models of justice, of divine enlightenment. . . .

When they got up to leave, all the guests grouped themselves around them, forming a respectful escort moving toward the red-and-gold sleigh now waiting at the door. The others did not go in immediately, standing in groups near the door. The St. Albans' other sleigh and one or two carriages were waiting. The snow was falling and the skaters were going home in dark clusters. Madame Colen and her niece, who had not uttered a word the whole afternoon, got ready to leave. M. Colen had left after the vocal exercises.

Just then another climax occurred, not nearly as terrible as the other. Elodie, delivered from her provision-closet, entered the room, her face purple and swollen from screaming and crying. She accused me, and I think that the red brute, the Diver, would have slapped me, if he had not realized that I would repay him with a rain of punches.

I was fifteen and a chastisement more sharply wounding than a slap was administered to me. Madame Colen studied my face as if she were searching my features to find confirmation therein of the cruelty and imbecility which had been described to her. Since I nursed that flame of ardent admiration for her called a "great love," I was crushed with shame. She left without noticing my low bow, warped by humiliation.

Without announcing their departure Marthe and my mother had left half an hour before. Sylvia and I went

B.

out into the snow without saying a word, like two rebuked children who are beyond discipline.

Marthe's appearance had been brought about by a heart attack of Christine's. The house maid having gone out, Marthe ran for help in spite of her weakened condition. Recognizing the Major's sleigh, returning from the landlord's house, she got into it and in a moment was standing breathless on the threshold. Her strength gave way only when she faced the compact mass of the guests in whose faces she read terror and alarm.

PART TWO

XI

About three years after the scenes I have just described Marthe and I passed our summer vacation together. Sylvia had accompanied my mother and father to Dieppe, a bathing resort less middle-class then than it is today. My mother suffered from this enforced rest; she wrote to us every day; her anxiety was increased because Anne, then four or five years old and already tubercular, had been ordered—in spite of my father's contrary opinion—to breathe calmer air, drenched with sylvan essences. In her present nervous state she abhorred all noises, all society; her frail yellow body was inhabited by the spark of life of a woman of forty, wasting away.

Anne was tended by a governess, a specimen of the thin, futile type of young Parisian who had imported her conservatory manners, including a mechanical habit of twisting her mouth into the shape of a heart, which gave it the aspect of an irritated anus. She had picked up much miscellaneous knowledge by reading popular reviews. She was tall and attractively dressed, looking like a child, precociously wise. She managed to endure life with us during this vacation, but left as soon as my mother came back. As for myself, I hid behind my idiocy in order to ignore her manifestly good intentions toward me.

At this time my wild and taciturn character was thrown into greater relief as my idiocy grew less apparent. After the Rupel school I had been sent to a boarding school at Bouillon where my *gentle* nature soon caused me to be ranged with the intractable pupils. I was chief of the band that attacked the "Jesuits," as we called the seminary students; but as soon as the band returned within the precincts of our own college, it broke up without my order and leagued itself against me, who resisted it in a spirit of audacious effrontery, since physical strength alone was not sufficient to withstand it. I had to give up that school too, at length, and my father proceeded to put me through a sort of "hothouse" home training. My new masters, who also gave lessons to Marthe and Sylvia, were so relentless that I was almost dead with fatigue after I had passed their final examinations, and had to spend the summer vacation recuperating my physical powers. During this vacation I spent long afternoons on the balcony of our house with Marthe.

On the third day of the examinations occurred my first experience with a woman who was able to teach me more than inexperienced governesses or actresses on tour. I have passed over a number of incidents with lesser women and the contacts of infancy. All readers are familiar with such brief animal adventures, flat and spiritless, and so localized in the physical being, that the brain, the melodic imagination and the sensibilities do not play the musical rôle which they assume in adolescence.

If the experience at Bouillon had been premeditated

it would not have ended in the revelatory fulfillment of which I just spoke. The loveliness of the woman, her strange position in the midst of life's conventional lies, the fresh splendor of her body surprised in its nudity —all that filled my imagination, and was placed between my sexual appetite and its satisfaction. But with admirable deftness the woman plunged me immediately into the realm of the carnal, as though she were forcing a stallion to cross a stable enveloped in flames, preventing wildness and terror from seizing him by covering his eyes with her hands.

The balcony where we spent the warm afternoons formed a cradle of foliage and flowers; the flowers hung low and caressed our cheeks; at noon the sun took possession of the street as by an enfilade, and the shadows deepened, painting the balcony with blue, clothing the house-fronts with transparent purple. All afternoon we read there, languidly coiled up in this shadow, scented with the balmy essences of heliotrope and roses. Opposite us were gardens with fruit trees planted in squares, to the right the continuation of the boulevard, whose trees we could see from the rear windows of our house; farther along was the "pest-house," built above the sluice, and under which ran the water, passing through the water-gate, to join the big river. On one side stretched the meadow which could be seen from Julienne St. Albans' windows, in the winter used by skaters and now covered with drying linen.

In this enchanting cradle of scents and shadows, romantically cut off from the street, cut off from the gray rooms of the deserted house, we found complete

seclusion; and as we read silently through the long afternoons the sun slowly spread his mantel over the landscape below us. Christine brought us our tea, and small cakes which she had made with her own hands. We were lonelier now than ever before, and this arbor of foliage was like the cave of my boyhood, but less dismal and more exquisite.

Reconciled with my sister, and not only with her but with myself, I had promised never to betray her confidence, even if to do so was to her advantage or to give her pleasure, even if it were a matter of life and death, as it had seemed to be when in that absurd interview with my father I had revealed the fate of the pills. We had mounted the gentle successive planes that lead to intimacy; we enjoyed to the utmost the kind of confidence possible between two persons accustomed to suspecting ambushes, who expect to be jostled at every corner of life, as at every corner of the town. Before we spoke we did not have to turn the tongue over in the mouth seven times—as a man who wanted to discourage loquacity once advised; but we passed the pipe of peace between us each time we spoke, in order to placate the landscape ever brimming with terrible memories and fabulous creatures dwelt on by the imagination, as Buddha dwelt on the philosophic crater of his own navel. Our mutual confidence was bound up with the persistency of our sorrows.

Marthe, now eighteen and a half—I was one year younger than she—still had the lovely dark eyes of her childhood; apart from her twisted mouth you would have been struck on seeing her for the first time by the

deep imprint of unhappiness stamped on all her features, and in her liquid eyes. I cannot say how these signs were graven there or wherein they seemed to form the tissue of her face. You could not look at her but a somber anguish at once caught at your heart, and perhaps the sole act of goodness I have performed in my life was to spend with her, without conscious intent, all our free hours; for a subtlety was needed beyond that which dictated that I conceal all I suffered in her behalf. I can find no other praiseworthy act in my life; but it pleases me in this desert of mediocrity and violence to regard the memory of the concealed suffering I then endured as an aged general, dying in obscurity, might turn over and over his only medal, won in his only battle. In the same fashion as the raven clothes himself with a single peacock feather.

Marthe hid very few of her thoughts from me. We talked at great length, and often an odd silence spread like still waves between our questions and replies. Sometimes she seemed to be reflecting on an unadmitted problem, juxtaposed to the one we were discussing, and appeared to voice only what was least urgent in her thought, concealing what presented itself as less normal, more aggressive; and she did this so skilfully, always avoiding, or only reluctantly focussing on, what lay beneath our talk, that she succeeded merely in designing enigmas, a kind of rebus underneath which we pursued our thoughts, grown sinuous because of her shyness, her fear, her modesty, and also because of her need for exactness, an exactness at which some might arrive after several gropings, but which she must needs

achieve at a single blow. Failing this she abstained or set down notes, words forming obscure propositions which I was compelled to regard as conundrums, and parabolic prophecies.

One morning we received Honorée in this charming nest of flowers, a profanation which we had not time enough to avoid. No longer clad as a young girl, Honorée already resembled that sort of well-made package a respectable woman presents; there was not a single disobliging blemish of grace or fantasy.

"Don't stay here," she cried out before even answering our greetings, our hypocritical welcome. "You simply can't stay here when mourning crêpe is hanging on the house next door!"

"We're just as invisible here as we would be in our rooms," Marthe said.

"They know you're there. The whole town will be passing by here within the next half hour," Honorée replied.

"If you like, we'll wait inside."

"Well, I shan't stay here anyway. Look at the number of gentlemen waiting for the door to open so they can leave their cards. And that reminds me, papa is sick, as you know. Pierre, will you please leave his card in the basket along with yours?" Honorée asked, having come for that purpose.

"I handed my father's card to one of the undertaker's men," I answered. "He will throw it into the basket as soon as the door is opened."

"Impossible!" Honorée cried. "And you live just next door!" Momentarily she laid off the mask of affec-

tation which habitually veiled all the expressions of her inexhaustible wisdom; for one moment she was natural, and completely scandalized.

In spite of the gentlemen clad in black, already stationed in groups in the street below, in spite of the fact that at a distance we could discern the hearse drawn by horses wearing black ostrich plumes, Honorée lingered a moment longer on the balcony, for she saw a coupé turning into the street at the other end. Her aim was to cast a glance into the coupé which she had recognized, to assure herself that Madame Colen was sneering at the town. It seemed urgent, indeed absolutely necessary that she reassure herself. A young woman like Honorée, representing in such a pinchbeck manner the worthiest members of Rupel's younger set, owed it to herself as much as to others to set the tone which should be taken in circumstances created by the misconduct, not to say depravity of one of them. She and some few others equally intelligent, must make a choice among the thousand different smiles which one bestows on friends and acquaintances, the one which young ladies should henceforth put on when, with an agreeable grimace and a slight deprecatory droop of the head, they greeted Madame Colen. Certainly Honorée's curiosity incited her less than the mystic ardor of her sense of duty, of solidarity, of style in this matter of avarice of the heart; in short, her desire to be a model of impeccable decorum.

"That's her carriage," she said softly.

We looked out with her. Honorée was too near-sighted to see the animated face of Madame Colen

through the glass in front of the coupé. A young man leaned indolently back in the carriage at the side of the pretty young woman. We knew by sight this handsome good-tempered young man who, I am sure, was quite without guile. He was born to give pleasure to a woman who thirsted for pleasure: a woman who had been violated by her husband, the coarse grain merchant. That cube of wood and varnish down there in the street isolated, even if not quite successfully, one of the thousands of couples who every season undergo a fiery passion which later will be snuffed out without dignity. In a city people feel pity, or perhaps pity veiled with irony, for frail beings who try to live out a great love with mediocre resources. In Rupel everybody cried like Honorée:

"I see them; then it's true!" Since she was soon to join the ranks of the married herself, Honorée felt an even greater burden of responsibility, and so she added with a rage whose heat bore her along:

"It's a challenge!"

On the contrary, the two occupants of the carriage were aghast to find so many people in a street which usually at this hour was peopled only by a stray dog, a servant stalking along with her basket, to be swallowed up quickly in a near-by shop, or a strange peddler, ringing doorbells with his back to the street; while the people whom it was important not to be seen by were at their little affairs, the women busily occupied in their households, often working in the kitchen. It was only in the afternoon that the women of Rupel stationed themselves at their windows or by means of a mirror

adjusted in a way that revealed the entire street they spied out, like a peeper at a keyhole, the ways of their fellow-townsmen, while they themselves were hidden.

After coming back into the room Honorée made no further remark about "that woman's" imprudence; she saw that we were indifferent, showing no appreciation of her discovery. And indeed what business was it of two persons who so consistently and deliberately stayed outside the social framework? How could we possibly be concerned about the moral beauty of the town? We who were "Jews," "scoundrels," "assassins," "spawn of Flibbertigibbet"?

Honorée talked about the arrangements that were being made for her approaching marriage with Lieutenant of Artillery, Poutry. Poutry was such a model of all that was proper, so innocent of vice, so shining with good qualities that I cannot draw his portrait without both boring and wounding the reader. He accomplished his military service with all the spirit and intelligence of a pulley, of a transmission belt, of an infallible diuretic. What completely won the esteem of Rupel's judges of character was that he studied, and reported on, all the economic resources of the town, of the surrounding villages and farms, performing this task with such mean and jealous pains that he succeeded in reducing expenses by one-half. Glorious triumph!

Louise's husband—Louise had married in spite of her ideas on woman's freedom—seemed less exemplary. Besides, he had not been, like Poutry, born in Rupel. Of course he had not yet taken a mistress, but he walked through the streets with too much unconcern, as if he

didn't know that an ingratiating humility, a certain expectant attitude, submission, in fact, was the only attitude that could win for him the honor of becoming a naturalized citizen of Rupel. Honorée made all this plain with remarkable tact, feigning unexpected difficulties as she compared the conduct of the two officers. Superior young woman that she was, she could not conceal her anger at having to stay there with her father's card at the bottom of her handbag, not having been able to leave it. On leaving she praised our balcony filled with shadows; we understood perfectly that she saw it as an excellent post of observation, so delightful with its hundreds of flowers which excused and justified her sycophantic presence.

XII

The roadway between the two sidewalks was a white river, sewn with colored spangles; women had sprinkled snow-white sand and children had scattered brilliant confetti over it. At the end of the street had been set up, one hour earlier, a portable altar decorated with vases of frothing flowers, with red banners embroidered in gold, statues of saints and votive symbols. The candelabra appeared like armed hands stretching out of windows, with their huge tapers burning like crimson swords. Lengths of velvet and liturgical stuffs were draped over window sills, on which curious people already leaned, ready to announce to those inside the arrival of the procession.

Little girls, veiled and dressed in white; priests enveloped in I know not what heavy Byzantine costumes; baldaquins like the immense covers on candy boxes; caskets containing a femur, a tooth or a pubic bone; banners; gentlemen carrying tapers, among whom I picked out Napoleon de Toow, Colen, our landlord and Poutry, Honorée's future husband.

Then a strange silence fell, preceded by suppressed "ohs" and "ahs" and a murmur of prayers. They were hoisting up the Immaculate Virgin, like a dove on a pyramid of flowers. The important rôle of representing this holy personage was awarded every year to a young

girl of Rupel. During the year the priests trembled in fear of the battles, jealousies and calumnies whose virulence they had to appease before the day of the procession arrived. This year the conflict among the candidates, who shamelessly declared that they were of a purity like unto that of the image they hoped to represent, threatened to bring to light secrets that would result in barren scandals and futile bickering. To set these threats at rest and to soothe the fierce hatred that already yeasted like leaven in a dunghill, the priests had chosen a young girl from a class that publicly did not usually aspire to the glory. Although she had but lately come back to Rupel, the priests nevertheless vouched for the orthodoxy of her upbringing. In any case, the victory was not awarded to any one of the chaste amazons who craved it.

The Virgin seemed strangely beautiful; but behind her veil I could see only the carriage of her head and, at the moment, when she passed under our balcony, the suave contour of her face.

"How lovely she is!" Marthe exclaimed.

"I can't see her very clearly."

"That lovely girl is Antoinette," Marthe said. "She came back three days ago."

"Came back?"

"Why, yes. Not that she has fallen out with her aunts at Mons, although they're always quarreling over her. Both of them want to make a saint out of her without being able to agree on the best method. The older one is in favor of the system usually suited to the mind of those who have a *call*."

"Stupefy them after mutilation," I thought.

"The other wants her to get there by acquiring varied knowledge. Following her natural inclination, Antoinette read and read, surrounded herself with pretty things, but didn't altogether neglect the system of the elder! She, with a doomsday voice, scolded her younger sister for these perverse tastes which the niece showed for the vanities of the day. From morning to night Antoinette had to listen to her aunts' disgusting disputes, like a griffon bickered over by rabid collectors, so drunk with their bigotry that they would not mind seeing the victim quartered. So she finally had to leave."

"Then those rumors I heard at Julienne's three years ago. . . . " I began.

"Louise said," Marthe answered, "that in Rupel people are trying in all possible ways to find out if the aunts, as bitterly divided as they are, will give Antoinette a dowry."

"She's got lots of time to think about that, hasn't she?"

"Of course. She's my age," Marthe said dreamily. "She's not like any of the young girls around here. I've heard that she's a raving beauty," she added naïvely.

"Why did she consent to this sort of game?" I asked, thinking of the procession.

"Perhaps it's not a game to her, but a thing of beauty," Marthe said, flushing, perhaps thinking of the forbidden rosary of beads in her room.

"But she's a believer!"

"I ask myself how you can be truly religious if you

are born with a God," said Marthe. Gazing at me, she resumed after a short pause:

"If it were for the sake of beauty, of poetry, you'd observe the effects of this poetic feeling in other acts of their lives, in their ideas, in their delicacy, and above all in their love. . . . If this religion were the natural complement of their poetic souls, Honorée and Louise would not marry the two young men they've just chosen. . . . "

"But they didn't choose them!"

"I don't see how that sort of thing is possible. . . . "

"In Rupel there's no room for anything beautiful and generous like love!"

"Do you know what it is?" she asked; then seeing my embarrassment she added:

"Not yet. We'll talk about that later."

After luncheon we went back to our retreat of foliage and flowers. Below in the deserted street, on the threshold of the empty house, slept the town idiot. Now and then one of the rare ragamuffins from beyond the bridge passed by and flung a pebble at him, or called him some vile name and shook him; then having amicably proven that he had not passed so near him without taking note of his presence, ran off nonchalantly. Moreover, for some time past these urchins had been squeezing from this creature all the pleasure that he could afford them. To cast a stale insult at him was an ancient rite accomplished now without conviction; it possessed no fascination for them and contained no whit of the spicy flavor with which their persecutions of Marthe overflowed. The league also counted among its numbers

several adults; the sermons of the priests every Sunday contained allusions to the "Jews." What is more, Marthe was a conscious victim of these outrages; her flushed face and the tears that welled in her eyes were a pepper-and-pimento goad to those who insulted her. Whereas the injuries they inflicted on the idiot seemed to amuse him as much as themselves; they aroused no murmur of protest in him. His life flowed in a long channel of joy and laughter as open as the notes of a flute. A smile, truly the gift of God, spread itself over his soft face when he saw that his tormentors were having a good time.

"Is he happy?" Marthe inquired, as though she expected a reply to a question which she answered for herself every day. Just then the sound of many light footfalls came down the street. It turned out to be the musicians of the orphan's band, pale young lads clad in black uniforms. They had been given lunch in town and were now returning after the procession, in which they had taken part. As they marched along they played a fragment of popular music. While we were watching them they stopped playing.

The idiot, now fully aroused, blew out his cheeks and lurched toward the musicians who paused to look at him. With his hand he caressed, one by one, all the big brass instruments resembling great yellow beasts spirally curved in their shells. He continued these caresses impetuously, with growing ardor and passion. He was so drunk with these sensations that for a moment he forgot to follow them when, starting to play, they began marching again. Then with a bound he lunged

after them, his face red and earnest, hoarding his gestures, reducing all unessential activity like a miser who trembles lest he drop a crumb. Gravely he whipped himself up into a crazy spasm, and danced around in one spot with a strict observance of the rhythm; then he started off again. At moments, quite unable to check himself, almost bursting with emotion, he clasped his head between his hands in ecstasy, apparently shaken by the tremors of an unknown orgasm.

"Is he happy?" Marthe repeated in a low voice.

"A question we try to answer every time we meet an idiot. I've heard a good many people reply with the greatest assurance. Others speak of how they're possessed by demons, darkness of soul. . . . "

"But what do you think, Pierre?"

"I find myself up against another question," I replied. "Can you be happy without knowing anything else? Without having experienced sorrow? And does that ordeal preclude future happiness? Alas, Marthe, I know nothing, nothing. . . . "

"Men don't know much, do they, Pierre?"

"Nothing. . . . I don't know. . . . "

The idiot returned and now seemed sad. He sat down again on the threshold of Mimi's house. Mimi's mother had gone away on a very vulgar escapade from which, we well knew, she would come back. Her daughter had grown very pretty and clever; she was full of a delightful physical buoyancy and sold everything you could possibly think of in that little shop; everything that can be sold, indeed, save one thing: of that she made a gift which she offered passionately, with a kind of

splendid barbarism. She had kept her vow not to marry; she believed only in very brief affairs, from which she emerged fresh, and gathered herself together for a new leap, fully as eager as before. Amorous, generous, frank, knowing the corrosive acid of vows of constancy and the poverty of caresses repeated in a landscape always filled with the same two eyes, she scolded her mother roundly for her sentimentality; and she would have answered Marthe's question about love quite scientifically, while Scarab, on the other hand, clung to the scene of her conquests.

In front of her heteroclite shop passed a tiny little girl carrying a bottle filled with water. The idiot rose, inclined his vast body toward the child, took the bottle and fondled it just as he had caressed the brass instruments of the musicians. He stroked it tenderly as though it were the neck of a horse, while waiting for her to say something to him. Presently he took a swig of it, caressed it once more and handed it back to the little girl who apparently found all this quite natural.

"There's a reply for you, Marthe. His world is peopled by a big crowd of amiable beings, docile ones who do not repulse his love: living bottles, singing trombones. . . . "

"He seems to hear music in a different way from us, more powerfully, indeed more deeply. . . . " Marthe finished with hesitation. Later I came to realize that that "indeed" of Marthe's gave proof of great but innocent intuition. Namely that in the sexual life of the idiot, music produced what no woman and perhaps no man had been able to arouse.

"And he amuses himself easily without any playfellows, as far as we can see."

"He amuses himself without being forced to name his games, without the deliberate help of anybody. Couldn't you say that happiness is the power to bear life without having to depend for pleasures on other living creatures?" Marthe demanded.

"Yes! Ah, yes!" I cried, frightened, without stopping to ask myself whether she were right or wrong. I merely perceived that if she were right Marthe would be able to go on living in spite of the curses that weighed upon her.

"You remember, Pierre, that I tried to plunge into one of those joys, the vision of heaven itself, without even knowing how much I was separated from the world?"

"Don't talk that way, Marthe. If you have no friends, you have me at least, always. Let's not talk of silly things. Do you know of any pleasure greater than these weeks we've just spent together? Who can rob us of that pleasure?"

Marthe's face wore a smile of indescribable pain, then she put out her hand in gratitude. I blushed at our sentimentality. Happily Marthe's interest in the idiot caused our glances to turn toward him. Mimi, coming out of her shop, had given him an iron hoop. He tied it to his neck with a string which kept it in front of him like a big bass drum; and with a stick he beat out in perfect rhythm on the iron ring one of the marches of the morning's procession.

"Yes, he loves music," Marthe said, fascinated.

The idiot went off; not a single feature of his Buddha-like face but quivered with pleasure; it seemed to be secretly animated by a thought that was veiled by his poor human flesh. Passersby feigned to admire him, but he paid little attention to the spectators. He was filled with a sense of his high office. His face, like that of a savage, betrayed its emotions. In spite of the air of grave responsibility which he assumed, his drunken happiness vibrated in every feature. A diabolic malice of which he must have been ignorant blended with his candid glance; a malice whose meaning I ached to probe to its precise source, to find out whether he was aware of it or not. In any case a part of his malice was compacted of something akin to dissimulation, arising from a hidden spring, which put us whether we willed it or no, but quite amicably, in connivance with him. "Don't let yourself be fooled any longer," his look seemed to say. "This isn't the real procession. You laugh, and so do I. I enjoy myself. But you don't —not much. Your pleasure compared to mine is a stark pitiful thing. I'm having a glorious good time. And although you're right to laugh, I'm really having the fun."

"He is happy," Marthe murmured again, as if wrapped now in the veiled trance of a seer; the idiot had ceased to be the subject of her thought. To force her thoughts back to something less feverish than what seemed to be distracting them, I asked:

"Have you noticed how much those black mustaches of his make him look like the assistant station-master?"

"Oh no," Marthe said. "That fellow is an imbecile!"

"And this one's just an idiot."

Marthe laughed and I was content.

Slipping toward England and America, the sun cast shadows as far as the meadow, gilding the gables of a brick house and glazing both rivers, stretched out like a pair of thighs over which rouge had been spread after having been applied to cheeks. The church bells tolled vespers; the street basked in a moment of tense peace, starred with cries about to break forth, which precedes the end of a work-day. It was a favorable moment of calm in which to steal away into the country before the streets were invaded by truculent apprentices.

We went along the boulevard which could be seen from our flowered balcony; it was more solitary than the other where the mill-crowned knoll scattered its clay. The road was edged with green grass, as green as enamelled meadows which, just to show that they are there, Van Eyck paints in the frame of an open window. At the far end it halted abruptly right in front of the pest-house where, for several minutes, the gilded gable had glimmered like the charming pictures of pyramids on packages of chocolate which at that epoch fascinated us as much as the chocolate itself: esthetic pleasure. Inside the heavy walls a passage, open at both ends, enabled pedestrians to cross the river over the sluices, dams and floodgates which were vaulted over by the vast structure with its pointed roof and its windows barred up with wooden shutters. Scarcely broken by this obstacle, the wind traversed the framework, whistling, sighing out our anguish, while the water brawled menacingly under the arches which supported the house; in the

passageway our steps resounded as on the stones of some dark cave, making the bats of that Ogre House of Nordic legend flee in terror.

Beyond, the system of boulevards came to an end and the sandy slopes were covered with wild grasses. To the right lay the meadows, a barracks, and to the left ran the river, and more meadows. Passing over the bridge we found ourselves in a fine stretch of country; first came the breweries with blue peacocks on their roofs and turkey cocks in the courtyards; then the oil manufactories with their noise of cranes, of boats being loaded with bricks, with potter's clay and sand.

Farther on we felt ourselves already invading the outskirts of the Campine, broad and magnificent, which was ours indeed, if one can become the owner of land by virtue of walking over it with delight.

Neither the plains of Lombardy, nor the tragic marshes of Mantua, nor the red mountains of Scotland, nor the Roman Campagna and the Poitine marshes, nor the soft green grass of Surrey and Kent, nor any other site, has ever given me such complete pleasure as the sands of the Campine. And if Marthe sometimes felt real pleasure, moments of complete forgetfulness, it was there.

XIII

One morning among the pathetic letters from my mother we found one from my father, announcing the arrival in Rupel of Baron Muller. This event was quite without interest for me as I had never laid eyes on this person; my father had mentioned him as one of his comrades during his years at the university, when friendship had grown up between them. Muller had failed in all of his undertakings: medicine, a professorship, journalism. He now had only a very small income, some costly and rather splendid household furnishings, including rare porcelains and antique mirrors. One day, years ago, my father told us, he had come back from Saxony, himself carrying all the way a coffee service of fine porcelain; that is why, when we learned of a similar episode in the life of Goethe, we had without much subtlety nicknamed him Goethe, before we even knew him.

Now Goethe was coming to live in the house adjoining ours. My father had so strongly recommended it to him that he had confidently rented it and was soon expected to take possession. A telegram announced the day, the hour of his arrival. The letter from my father had given all specific instructions necessary for the guidance of an untameable buffalo. He never displayed the least interest in me, he was never curious as to what

was happening in my life nor in the stuff with which I was cramming my brain, but on this occasion his vanity demanded that his son should not make a bad impression on his old college friend. His doubts as to my capacities, especially when he requested me to invite his friend to the inn in his name, did not at all offend me; I grew bitter only when the idea occurred to me that these two men were using me inconsiderately, and by what error of judgment they deemed they had the right to do so, I did not know. I was full of contradictory thoughts, and without exception all were thoughts of rebellion.

With the letter tucked in my pocket I went to see Marthe and suggested a morning walk. The fresh air would dissolve what on that day I referred to as the spawn of evil microbes muffling my crazed brain.

Marthe could not go with me. She was seated in an armchair near the window; her breakfast tray, bearing an English breakfast (my mother adored all English customs of domestic life), had been thrust aside. Languidly she sent me away, asking me to come back some other morning. She gazed at me gently out of her big black eyes in which a little red flame burned beside a metallic blue reflection. Her thin attractive body, moulded clearly under her white and cerise dressing gown, her pigeon-white neck, her arm the color of marshmallow root—all its contours were firm but stamped with suppleness. I have often dreamed of learning to draw in order to reveal these contours which were at once so austere and voluptuous. The fragrance of lavender water, dispelling the breakfast odors, was

blent with violet, the scent she always used for her room.

She told me that she was still tremulous from her dreams and could not go out so early to meet crude reality.

"Bad dreams?" I asked.

"Often . . . almost always. Since that summer I have dreams of tenderness so intense that they wake me up, ravished. At those times I am bewildered with the delights which clasp me in their spell for several minutes." Tears came into her eyes. Will people understand when I say that at that moment Marthe was beautiful? Sensing the impression her low-voiced confession had made, she turned her head toward me, kneeling near her chair.

Her fine arm emerged from the dressing gown. Gracefully she picked up some bits of bacon and fried egg with the fork and stretching out her arm let them drop from the window into the poultry yard where the hens received them joyfully, cackling like little girls in a schoolyard.

Then with one of her customary sudden changes of mood, not untouched with a sort of abrupt cruelty, she made a little gesture which dismissed me.

I kissed her forehead and her beautiful arm and went out. Marthe's loving confidence travelled through all the by-ways of my spirit, and the letter stowed away in my pocket, alongside a little edition of *Le Rouge et le Noir* which Marthe had lent me, was quite forgotten.

The boulevard and the passageway under the pesthouse were deserted. The urchins had mended their

ways, having taken measure of my vigorous adolescent shoulders and no longer cried insults after me. The adults of our "society," on the contrary, maintained their cautious attitude, their distrust being, if anything, augmented; I was a moral excrescence, a ne'er-do-well, in spite of the examination I had just passed; or perhaps "a person of whom anything might be expected." This gave me in an unexpected manner, not very enviable and quite dishonoring, it is true, the solitude I liked and which could not have been won on any other terms.

Beyond the Peers bridge, past the blue peacocks of the breweries, the oil works and the barges, where the unforgettable Campine began, I slowed my pace and tried to read. Now, at seventeen or thereabouts once you have formed the habit of despising all authority and guidance, the one inflexible self-discipline being the refusal to accept the things that are handed out to you at that age, and if you happen to have in addition a mediocre mind, ideas are apt to come slowly. They tend to scatter and, instead of a rooted character, only possess a mysterious ardor, distinct and active in its blind urge, but it is an ardor that wanders freely, troubling rather than guiding thought. For hours on end I would sit musing and no fixed point would establish itself, no three-dimensional pillar rose up amid my spasmodic architecture. If there be other mediocrities who have sensed, under the swaddling-bands of obtuseness, the sharpened stakes of truth, who have caught a glimmer of light at the bottom of the mind's well—values which they were powerless to dredge to the sur-

face—they know well that, after this task which has no outlet in the realm of philosophy, they find themselves abruptly face to face with the fruits of a revolution in feeling that has taken place in the dim recesses of their personality. They discover it only at a time when it has ripened, when it offers itself as a thing completely achieved, whose proof is beyond dispute. They find themselves pervaded by something new, and it seems that this is evolved in secret with hypocritical irony, taking advantage of the fact that the unskilled mind is vainly bent on discovering its dead body, its tagged individuality, its theoretic inanimate mask. But this mechanism concerns the scientist.

I continued my walk along a road which ran between windmills whose wings wore a Sunday immobility, the red canvas rolled up to the very edge of the square ladders, like skeletons of leaves with a bit of dead cellular tissue still clinging to them. The windmill of that period was the one marked characteristic of the countryside about Rupel. Still reading I came to a sort of cupola, grass-covered and flowery, the eminence on which stood the first mill. Raising my head I exchanged a glance with a man who was seated hugging the wall, with several books propped on his knees. I had seen this man before and he had given me an indefinable impression—that of a gentleman-vagabond, a unique figure at Rupel, although not at all rare in Paris and London. His clothes were like ours but he had worn them until they were incredibly threadbare, and this offered the most amazing contrast with the cleanliness of his person. His handsome face had a dark Spanish cast, his black

hair was like that seen in Sicily on young heads, his short Moorish beard, which he trimmed himself with a pair of scissors, his body rather too long to house genius, the intelligence which shone in his features, scintillating in his glance, and, finally, his very gestures, everything about him challenged me, exciting my mind by one sudden shock to a powerful sympathy against which I at once bridled.

We looked at each other, and he smiled. In spite of his dark blue eyes doubled with black—one of the circles surrounded the iris, the other formed by lashes like a jay-bird—this smile was like a blasphemy to me. I had never beheld such a smile move with patient irony across the faces of Rupel people who had appeared up to that time as something above brutes, pigs and cows. Yet in spite of my usual boldness and impetuous manner, I suddenly grew shy, actually suffering because he had smiled at me in that way. And in my mental obscurity was born the fear that his words would not be able to fulfill the agreeable emotion he had aroused in me.

"You're reading *Le Rouge et Le Noir*." It was not the voice of the dark-skinned people of the south; those tones came from the throat of a Celt.

I said nothing.

"I wonder if that book was ever read by that cretin," he said, waving his hand toward the red house visible through the trees.

"You're right, he's a degenerate," I said. He looked at me oddly.

"Degenerate? Degenerated from what? An idiot,

rather," he corrected me, putting us in pleasant accord.

"Idiot?" I said, hesitating, in spite of myself.

"If you don't agree, all right. He isn't an idiot. Idiot is a phase, an epoch, a stage in the development of the cells that generate the quantity man, an intermediary between the average man and his superior, the epileptic," he said, smiling politely, to wipe out the impression of dogmatism in the notion he had just advanced, and as though he did not wish to insist on his opinion with the aplomb of some poor wretch of a protestant pastor.

A paradox, I thought. He went on:

"The epileptic, a being in an intuitive state higher than the idiot, would be a god if he hadn't soiled flesh clinging to his soul, like a woman fatally yoked to the spirit of a young artist."

Since I said nothing, he went on again:

"Well, enough of paradoxes, as you were thinking two seconds ago. Won't you sit down? We eat more or less out of the same trough, as that cretin down there would say."

"What's that?" I demanded, being more curious about his reply than I imagined.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "It seems I shock you. I am a qualified failure; I've travelled some. That's over. I do not complain. I've come to a turn of the road where a man enjoys ineffable pleasures. Yes, ineffable and incomprehensible to anybody who has not advanced that far himself." He was silent for a moment.

"I wonder if you know enough about yourself, about the position your—your 'bad character,' if you will

pardon that expression, will give you in the world? If you've already discovered and faced the sort of life that awaits you?"

"Go on," I begged him, looking with curiosity at his cane, a sort of hollow Malacca, with a steel rod inside that gave it a quite useless strength.

"I've been talking nonsense. It's inconceivable to me how I managed to speak to you so sincerely, so brutally, after having forced you to listen to me." He handed me the heavy stick so I might gratify my curiosity.

"You haven't in the least forced me. On the contrary, please go on." I examined the stick, bending it with difficulty, proud to note the surprise and admiration at this feat that greeted me like a handclasp. Then he went on:

"I scarcely know you, and so what I say cannot mean much." After a pause, "You're strong. Very few men can bend it as much as that."

"You know me," I said to him, handing him the stick. "It's about time you told me your name."

"Sterne," he said.

"Sterne!"

"Yes, Trim Sterne!"

"I beg your pardon. It's impossible. . . . You're joking."

"That's good. Well, don't worry about the joke. That's my name."

"Trim Sterne," I repeated in a serious tone.

"Yes, I see you got it right."

"If you're really the son of Lawrence, Trim, I'm much more delighted to have met you."

"Thanks, with all my heart. I flatter myself, for you're cleverer than people say."

"Thanks. And thanks for the gracious way you wiped out, the very same moment you said it almost . . . something which would have freed me from all obligation concerning you," I said, my mind stirred by Sterne's ease. "Somebody must have told you about my behavior at school," I added with a certain nuance of timid defiance which did not escape him.

"They've told me about that. About you in general. That makes up half of my documentation about you. I can easily make up the rest seeing you in this town. And I can figure out easily how the town must react to . . . to a black arm like yours."

Not only without resentment, but with growing pleasure I listened to him.

"You're absolutely ripe," was his next remark.

"For what?"

"To leave this pleasant little village today," he said.

"And go where?"

"To Bouillon, to begin with, then elsewhere. You have to complete the experiences which your friend has been talking about with so much disgust for several weeks."

Fernand G., home on vacation, had cost me the final and definitive ostracism which fell to my lot. At Bouillon, one night after dinner, he had accompanied older fellows to taste the adventures which fallen angels sold to stinking badgers behind a redlight sign. Thinking of Fernand, I thought of questioning Trim on the subject of that silly word which this particular badger had bestowed on my father.

"When you have studied," he said to me smiling, "as I have, legends and popular superstitions, you'll know those demons, those black princes who reign under bizarre names among peasants, beggars and thieves. But I have never met your Flibbertigibbet, whose memory Shakespeare has prolonged among the fools of Bedlam."

"But why spawn of Flibbertigibbet?"

"That means that your father is a *poseur*, Flib being the allegorical demon of contorsions and grimaces. If you were cross-eyed I might explain the choice of the sobriquet."

"I remember Fernand telling me that all I needed was to be cross-eyed."

"Then," he exclaimed, "you probably had sore eyes when you were a child, or had a way of looking cross-eyed, for Edgar in King Lear says that this demon spreads cataract, film, causes cross-eyes, harelip and generally casts a blight. . . . "

"Ah!" I cried, interrupting Trim, thinking that this outrage, too, came to us from pedants, for Fernand had certainly never read Shakespeare and his father read him, if at all, with dull spectacles.

"The town is not really ugly," I said, to steer the conversation along more neutral lines.

"No, maybe not. It's useful to the science of archeology: for here you can study the 'manners and customs' of the Middle Ages. I'm quite serious. You might study them as when in studying the Romans today you try to picture to yourself ancient Roman life. There's no

difference. They haven't moved: we have gone forward but not they."

"Paradox!"

"Go and spend a year or two in Rome!"

"Are you Italian?"

He made a light gesture of denial, indicating his reluctance to reply.

"I'm sorry!" I said.

"Ask me questions and give me time to reply."

"Do you like Rupel?"

"No, I am studying its people and its façades while waiting for money to get me out of here."

He is going away, I thought, feeling an odd tightening of the chest which is known as "heart-rending." Strangers passed. Trim Sterne gazed at the advertisements in the back of my copy of *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, which he had perched on the top of his books.

The strollers were three young people, two girls and a man. The slenderest of the three was a young woman clad in blue, with brown hair shimmering with pale gold tints; the movement of her thighs was visible under the light lawn dress. She walked as lightly as a lark, executing several last steps on earth before he rises to the run. Her ankles were delicate and her legs muscular but well-rounded. Her back was broad, hollowed between the shoulder blades. I labored with such minuteness to reconstruct the hidden forms under the dress that I recovered myself only after the girl had given me a fugitive glance of recognition, thinking no doubt that I would return it instantly. I scarcely noticed Trim Sterne's absorption.

As she moved away her step made me think of steel, yielding, but yielding with dignity: bending only under the stress of such forces as would not deprive her of honor and her uncompromising distinction. Hers was the beauty of the north where the buttocks do not sway in harmony with the thighs until the matron stage is reached, when the female is no longer to be confused with the male. But both in the north and the south this andalusian hipswaying is becoming more pronounced; all races originating on the shores of the Mediterranean possess this negligent motion of the buttocks which makes you think of a stableful of mares, of a narrow street, of the habit of wearing old wornout clothes.

I told Trim what I thought of this motion.

"It's a heritage," he said. "In the classics you'll find the Romans praised for this swaying motion which they knew how to teach their muscles. And of course we don't ever mind it in women who are public property, those for whom, with our discreet morals, we don't hold ourselves responsible."

"I can see that from the viewpoint of the animal. . . . "

"Ah, indeed! You're the animal in that case, and the woman is the angel of love, isn't she?" he asked.

"But there's something else," I began.

The young woman in blue strode away in the distance. Her white neck surged up out of a white collar under a horrible bargeman's hat; there was a very thick chignon at her nape, rolled up between two pretty small rosy shells, her ears. Of her face the only impression I retained was one of sweetness. After a silence

Trim rose, with his eyes still fixed on the three young people.

"That pretty little blue virgin is only waiting for a chance to chuck that grotesque hat with its ribbons. She asks for other bread than the capitalist God of Rupel. She is far too lovely for Him. . . . " The expression "blue virgin" threw into relief the impression I had of the face; I found old and recent images superimposed in my mind, as in dreams, and no face emerging with precision.

Rising to go, Trim handed me my book. "Take these," he urged, placing in my hands the books he had been holding on his knees. "Read these; perhaps you do not know them all."

"No," I said. "Do you like all of them?" He smiled at my puerile malevolence about the books.

"You won't be able to like them, either, once you've read them, just as before you finish with barbarism you study—and rightly—the Greeks, and even the Romans, never after loving them except through wilful blindness, through the hypocrisy of the opportunist."

"But even today a complete education——"

"Ah, yes! For idleness, wisdom and politics agree today in endowing education with a solidity akin to religion, patriotism and militarism. Very clever of them to have made it a blasphemy not to respect the classics. It's not a question of their value. I understand that in Italy and in the south of France they find these models commendable in spite of their coarseness, from which I'd scarcely care to exempt Plato. But in Paris, where humor is a blessed virtue, I can't make this fetichism

out. As for England, it's a matter of indifference, of lazy conformity. For, apart from the fact that the meanest member of the middle class would not tolerate the odor of these heroes, their superstitious ideas or their morals nearly always based on untenable *a prioris*, their shopkeepers' notions of painting alone would discredit them, if they weren't protected by the conservatives who like to slide through this brief life in a soft and comfortable dusk where one sleeps as cozily as on an afternoon spent at the club. Moreover, verse is an odd form, an animal thing, a physical rhythm, often obscene, which brings to mind a certain commentator of Saint Augustine who was able to fart at will in time with whatever verse was recited in his presence."

"Have you taken your degree?"

"Certainly. Like your father, like everybody you know, like yourself in four years, as here at Rupel you've got to have a religion, a political opinion with a label officially stuck on, if you don't want to be labelled 'scamp.' "

"Another paradox, but a sceptical one!"

"Oh, young friend, we have just been born. Maybe we'll stop painting, rhyming and begin to live. Sceptic? But look at my rags; I hope with 'axe in hand.' "

"What do you mean?"

"It's a thing people don't mention. For a thousand years there have been rare people who've been in a state of despair, and that was good for them. It's a sort of faith that comes to us if we hide from the gods, voluptuous only for ourselves. It would be silly to try to instill it into you as a parish priest hands over

recipes for dainty dishes dear to the angels. I only wish you possessed it."

We walked in silence. The thought came into my mind that it was unjust that such a thing could not be decanted from one heart into another: a different and new frustration of Marthe, I thought once more. In writing this, I feel myself crimsoning. But the reader knows I was extremely young and very simple for my age, simple and yet a madman.

Before leaving me Trim gave me his address, and it turned out to be in a street where there wasn't a house fit to give shelter to a gentleman, even if he were down-at-the-heel.

He strode away smoking a cigarette. I returned by a street narrower than the avenue of ancient oaks. First, it wound round the knoll of the second mill, then, in front of a small fairy-tale house, widened for a moment, as the linoleum in the corridors of student hotels widens in front of each door. An ancient walnut tree hung over the house, one branch drooping low over the door. Flowers wherever a flat surface permitted a terra cotta pot to stand upright, and a wooden box filled with black soil. Geraniums, fuchsias, heliotropes; mauve and red flowers made luminous fringes to the white curtains behind shining window-panes, looped over all the windows. Anne's old nurse lived here. The garden unmistakably showed that her husband was a gardener. As you gaze on such gardens they murmur in your ears that wisdom lies hidden between their walls, persuading you to remain within them, to make your abode there without delay. Vanished counsels, beaten back by the

agents of reality and convention, once we break through the circle of their fragrant breathings. On me these gardens made an impression akin to the desires awakened by wistful cloisters where furtive monks promenade their passion in pairs, or some sweet and shadowy retreat like the hollowed-out cave of my childhood. That attraction of closed gardens, although common enough, had such power over my misanthropic spirit that more than once since then I have striven to duplicate on a square of foreign earth just such a garden, which perhaps lacked only a second monk. It was in England that I succeeded best. There every man thinks of the peace of his neighbor.

Trim Sterne's books were pirated Dutch editions belonging to the period between 1842 and 1850, I think. Thenceforward—about 1890—I read all the volumes of Balzac I could lay my hands on. I was cast into a fever of romanticism, haunted noisomely by imaginary personages. I read to the point of nausea. I was like a young girl who, infatuated by reading, not being able to control her nerves any longer, swoons away one fine day, exhausted by the reckless activity of her imagination.

If Trim's volumes had smelled less of tobacco I should have lent them to Marthe. For her, it seemed to me, this exotic scent would not have induced the charming sensations that seized on my heart so that I yielded myself to it with utter abandon.

XIV

With an impressive rumbling the train from the big port came into the station. I was to recognize Baron Muller by his beard, of a length unknown in Rupel, and by his large bag of gray morocco leather. I addressed the only traveller who got off the train.

"Yes, sir," he replied. And we started off, he like a man in a hurry who knew where he was going, I, following, bewildered; his haste did not last long; when he had arrived at the large square outside the station, near the "Circle," with its black and withered park, his pace slowed down and he stared at me, this time not as if I were a blind and dumb teapot, but as a live being, perhaps even one endowed with intelligence.

"Is Rupel a pretty town? Are there any ancient monuments? Who is that gentleman? He appears to be a distinguished person. What's that house? The casino? How many large cafes are there? Are the inns well-heated in winter?" And other questions which I have forgotten. At the word "inn," however, I emerged from the dejection into which these questions had cast me, and extended the invitation that my father had unwisely asked me to make in his behalf.

I erred. He was going there before I could suggest anything. Not to the first-class restaurant, but to a second-class inn which I had never entered, although

it was attractive to my untamed soul because of its secluded position and its narrow windows that malignly shut out the exterior world.

Inside, while I was having a table reserved for him, he looked around scornfully. Tall, broad shoulders, deep-set little eyes, low forehead scarcely lined, a long outspread beard, as I have said, almost as black as Trim's hair. He wore brilliant rings on his fingers. A brown suit, almost black and of an ample cut, seemed to enlarge him, giving him the look of a giant. I was unable to discover why his scorn had suddenly disappeared, but suddenly he seemed to take possession of the place, and he seated himself at a window pierced in a corner of the room. His scorn reappeared when he beheld the waiter, clad in a fantastic coat, bringing a slate framed in red-painted wood, upon which was carelessly scrawled in pencil the names of the dishes dictated to him by the cook with hippopotamus cheeks, who could be seen through a wicket behind the counter. While I was musing on what my father would say of the choice of the inn, which he would blame me for having made, Muller glanced swiftly over the promises of the slate. He blinked his eyes and questioned me with a sarcastic look.

"Yes," I said, compelled by circumstances: "the best cuisine in Rupel."

"Provincial dishes?" he demanded, as if his only concern was that it should be a cuisine peculiar to this alien town.

"Please read it, sir," I said, without in the least knowing what he was going to read.

From then on he was quite indifferent to me for amusement. He ordered with the briskness of an old customer, with even a haughty air which, you had been feeling for some time, had no right to figure in his attitude. Poverty had forced a distasteful moderation upon him when he wished to "celebrate" or simply to dine well. He had sat down, spreading himself out in his chair like a setting hen, in the manner of a man quite devoid of coquetry, one who was accustomed to taking his meals alone. I felt pleased and relieved at this behavior, the responsibilities of the occasion having passed out of my hands.

He ate just as haphazardly as the bill-of-fare was thrown together, without following the usages taste has imposed upon us, without discriminating between the kinds and varieties of food. He devoured a partridge with cabbage out of the earthen pot in which it had been cooked. His mouth gaped like an immense crevice which was like the throats of the giants that march in Brabant parades, and for every one of whose beards the tails of six horses are requisitioned. Whenever that throat was about to engulf a femur and a thigh bone he crunched it with a single grinding of his jaws, laughed like a good-natured lion, paused, and drank a deep draught of foamy beer, as dark as the ale served at English bars.

The young girl behind the counter had stopped to converse with an invisible client, whose feet, gaitered ankles and motionless knees I could see. I surmised that these limbs belonged to the man with whom she was talking, the rest of whose body was hidden by a wooden

partition. The social position of this girl's sister was that of official mistress of the bachelor lieutenant at the fort, whoever he happened to be at the moment, whether he were tall or short, blonde or dark, rich or poor. The fort changed its lieutenant frequently, and the girl changed her affections automatically. This was so well-ordered that the wise townsfolk regarded these parallel promotions as having grown out of a venerable institution. Public opinion would have reared its head indignantly at any infraction of this rule of decorum; if the younger sister had attempted to copy the elder she would have been overwhelmed with harsh criticism, terrible reproach and perhaps serious chastisement. The younger sister, however, would never in the world have thought of usurping her sister's rights, reserving to herself unlimited freedom. She was a friend of Mimi's and, if I remember correctly, of the pretty Scarab.

Making gluttonous signs and noises, Muller gobbled up the hot Flemish dishes. The beer he drank like water must have contained cheap spirits, for the smile of my father's friend began to shine fatly. I could not hope to keep up with him in the consumption of food which he seemed to heave into a vast funnel. I was a healthy young man, tall, with bulky shoulders and a stomach that had nowise suffered from my somber humors. I ate with almost as much zest as my schoolfellow Paul, who carried the day over all the other students when we crammed sausages, and guzzled Louvain beer, as yellow as horse urine. I was not destined, I think, for the morose and secret life which Rupel had

imposed upon me; at least such is my belief. In my case the "carcass," as the red-haired doctor would have said, was stronger than the "spirit," as the pedant at the Rupel hospital might have put it. My father detested this sort of jargon.

The waiter, with coat and shirt unbuttoned, brought a salad and a sausage to a customer whom a partition hid from view, everything, that is, save his pale thin hands. He had not stirred at our entrance; peering around I recognized Trim, who—as soon as Muller, appeased by his first gay encounter with comestibles, began to talk loudly—leaned over in his turn and nodded to me. I told Muller that he was a friend who had lent me volumes of Balzac.

"Ah, so you have friends of that sort. Bravo!" He raised his glass of black beer. "Lends you books. . . . I'd like to lend you books, too, solid ones, salt, pepper, pimento, heretical onion, God, the Devil, angels above and below us, but, alas, it's true, I've sold them. Bah! I've still got some, the best ones. Lends you Balzac? Monkey shines! Hay and straw, those studies! You'll see, I've comic ones, gunpowder and . . . I gave my books to a young man like you. He thanked me, weeping—no, not weeping, but he was an intelligent lad in any case. He was happy. He thanked me. Owes his culture to me, his job even. Became a journalist. And as for me. . . . That reminds me, I suppose you know that I was once a journalist?"

Trim was eavesdropping. Muller, raising the slate to the level of his forehead, looked for new, warm things to eat. He asked me what they meant by a veal cutlet

with kidney. My explanation delighted him. His haughty air, like his napkin, was now nothing but dirty linen under the table. I had called Trim over who, standing close to our table, startled me by speaking in scornful, unsmiling tones to Muller.

"Make a man of that lad, Sterne," Muller said, pointing to me; then turning toward the waiter he cried: "Three!" Three veal cutlets with kidney was what he meant. We forced Trim to sit down.

It was in this fashion that my father's messenger shared a strange meal sitting between a swaggering old locher and glutton and a handsome young male with fine eyes and a magnificent brow under a black thatch of hair, and clear white skin gleaming where his rags left off.

Ragout of mutton, *Waterzooi*—a soup made of beef, chicken and sausage seasoned with garlic—, thrush *a la Liegoisé*, stewed with juniper berries; in fact, nearly everything that the slate had promised. Muller spread himself out. He seemed as wide as the table. His beard trickled.

We had added a rare morsel to the gifts we had already showered upon the town!

Muller treated Trim with a familiarity that puzzled me. Trim smiled like a rustic philosopher, gazing into the narrow street where occasional dogs were more numerous than pedestrians.

A timid citizen entered, seeking a familiar face among those seated at table, visibly keeping an appointment. The man he was looking for was not the one who was still engaged in conversation with the girl for,

drawing up to the counter, the citizen saluted him in military fashion. Two voices echoed his order. He seated himself, his back turned toward us, at the window next to ours.

Then with a voice splashing in quarts of liquor, Muller reverted to his proposal to make a man of me.

"Not at all amenable," said Trim, making a sign to me that we let this fellow Muller eat and bray like an ass who combined the appetite of a pig with that of a duck.

"I don't want to go through any course of study," I said, just to show that I should like to have him, Trim, as a conspirator against this gluttonous braggart.

"Bravo!" roared the Baron. At that moment the famous grain merchant, Monsieur Colen came in, rather uneasy and hesitant, conscious of being in a place unworthy of him. But he grew more confident when he saw, in addition to the timid citizen whom he greeted cordially with a wave of the hand, only three strangers, one of whom was myself, with my back to the door.

"Bravo!" Muller roared again and again, dissembling his impulse to slap me on the shoulder once he saw my mounting anger. Reassured, M. Colen sat down, facing the citizen, and the street whose dark façades he could glimpse between our heads. Presently two shame-faced lieutenants from the fort emerged, unable to stay concealed much longer behind the partition near the counter. One, Louise's husband, visited this inn as clandestinely as possible, seeking refreshment from the weariness produced by his pose of the self-possessed young man. By nature he was lively and care-

less, as a demi-god, incognito, might regale himself with mortal girls after casting aside his telltale attributes. The other fellow was Honorée's future husband, Poutry, who took out his notebook and made an entry every time he spent a sou, probably the fourth in a card game to be played by Monsieur Colen, the citizen and the two officers. Colen cherished too great a respect for the virtues of orderliness which this young man had so early developed, not to make up any losses he might suffer in this place where he came at his call and stayed under his aegis. Rupel was beyond doubt fully aware that Monsieur Colen frequented this inn, but the man's position was so impressive that he could with impunity abuse the provincial sense of decorum, his presence even having the occult power of throwing a defense round those who went with him there. We realized that this game of cards had a fixed place in the daily schedule of these gentlemen, that Colen was the inflated tyrant of the group; yet neither he nor the two military heroes judged it proper to recognize me in that suspect place.

They played in complete security. Colen, throwing down his aces, was privileged to yell the loudest. He pontificated not only with his voice but also with his fist, the clamor ricochetting out into the street, where it sought an echo in the throat of a dog who, yapping with fright, scampered away, coming back shortly afterward and nozzling the ordure in the gutter under an unhitched cart almost entirely barring the street. The horses had been led into the stable of the inn, once a relay of the post-chaise.

Muller had not stopped heaping approbation on us, crying his thickish "Bravo," and sometimes replacing it by an excellent oath which was at once uncouth and irrefutable.

"Because they are all lies!"

"Bravo!"

"Because at the university you're thrown in with the sons of merchants!"

"Excellent!"

"With grocers' sons!"

"Bravo!" Trim accompanied each one of Muller's cries with a terrible blow of his heavy cane, thus attracting everybody's attention.

"With the sons of priests and ministers!"

"Bravo! Bravo!"

"Of nobles fallen into filthy finance!"

"Bravo!"

"With German aristocrats. Drunkards who have stumbled into journalism!"

"Bravo!" he cried, but he stared at us with astonished good-humor, as if, having played with us, he had suddenly forgotten to cheat.

"Ho! Ha!" he said, starting to put his hand on my shoulder. Trim, in order to head off the vehement reply which he saw seething within me, took his hand and squeezed it.

"No hard feelings, *hein!*" said Trim with bourgeois intonation to Muller, imitating finely, with bold mimicry, Monsieur Colen's voice. The latter now lifted his head as if he had just discovered Trim, Muller and

myself. He had overheard us, and an expression of disgust was portrayed on his face.

A horse had been led out of the stable and hitched to the shafts of the cart, thus closing the little street to the first comer who wished to pass. A well-dressed woman, all alone, came along, the first elegant woman who had passed that way in years, I daresay. The features of her face were concealed behind a thick veil; she tried to pass behind the cart, between the window and the rear wheels of the vehicle, a width of only a few inches. Unable to do this, she paused near the window, at first surprised, then nervous and lastly frightened. Leaning across the table to get a better glimpse of the lady who had stopped in such a mean street, Monsieur Colen recognized her the same moment I did: it was Madame Colen who had apparently taken that strange route to cover up her tracks. Trim looked up at the face, a pretty tell-tale signboard, and said laughing, again imitating the accent of the grain merchant:

"Ah, it' the little doll, going to meet the nice *gigolo!*"

"Fine," said Muller, mechanically. Then his right eye grew larger, grew çovetous, and he said to me: "Then the dear little ladies use their marriage contracts for waste-paper."

It was Trim who replied to him, after having observed his stare and having meanwhile whispered to me: "*A bi-metallist.*"

"We know all about it, Baron! I recognize the woman because I've seen her in her carriage, fascinated by

Boccaccio's nightingale. Her husband is a handsome merchant of the town, very convex, like your young people in Berlin, Baron," he finished rather cleverly.

Colen, who had forgotten his card game, looked at Trim, his face devoured by swift disagreeable thoughts; the two soldiers, having been silent witnesses of the scene, cannily waited to see what was coming next. Excepting Muller and Trim, we all knew that, after the first chilling shock the blood coursed murderously in the grain merchant's gross body.

After Trim's last caprice, Muller quickly shot a furtive glance at him. Strangely enough, after the telling blow of that word "convex," Trim returned his look with an utter absence of guile. Trim seemed to be a chemist holding his test-tube to the light and seeing in it—vain triumph—just what he expected to find; while within me a curious alarm sounded, vague and faint, like that which unnerves a young woman who is ready—even when there is no ostensible cause—to claw to death with her fingernails some imaginary, darkly threatening foe of her blossoming love.

Colen got up and leaned the suffering hulk of his body against the counter. Trim also rose to leave. "See you soon," said Muller warmly; Trim, repeating Muller's parting greeting, left the inn, followed by Colen. Although he was a little better dressed than on the previous evening when I had met him near the mill, Trim scarcely looked the gentleman. Colen's movements were indecisive; he did not want to do anything rash. He did not accost Trim, as he at first seemed to have made up his mind to do.

Muller was completely outside this little pantomimic comedy. In his loose clothes he looked like an enormous "bearded lady" who is exhibited in side-shows at country fairs. One of his ringed hands, lost in the vast coat-pocket, crumpled the cloth into numerous folds where it met his trousers, which were as loosely hung as a skirt.

"Rupel is all right!" he said. "Your friend is almost as nice as you," he added. "I was mistaken an hour ago. I haven't a great deal to teach you." Then after a silence he looked at me and went on:

"I thought Rupel would be my degredation, my death!" And, saying that, he coyly dropped his free hand on my knee. I hastily moved back, like the very young and the very pure, or, like those who have already recognized in themselves some yearning toward acquiescence. I was startled because I was almost completely ignorant, and because Muller was ugly, an impudent punk, whose spirit, even uglier than his body, was both evil and repulsive.

What did "bi-metallist" mean?

At my gesture of withdrawal Muller toyed with a glass, and no one saw through this bit of business which concealed the cause of my fright. He drank his coffee in gulps, alternating it with little glasses of Hulskamp, a drink which so much intrigued Verlaine some years later.

After the merchant had gone, Honorée's fiancé did not stay long. Louise's husband came over to shake hands with me, just as two neighbors who have never

exchanged a word greet each other cordially when they meet at a fire.

"That . . . gentleman who was with you," he said to me, "has done a good thing. As for the woman, that's nothing. But he, a college professor, would certainly be sent to another town at the first breath of scandal."

"You know him too," Muller broke out vivaciously. The impression his vivacity made on me, coupled with what he said, illuminated his attitude toward Trim, and filled me with loathing for this impious glutton.

"No," said the other, going off after Honorée's intended husband, "I have never seen him." The bill was handed to me, and I paid.

XV

Out on the boulevard Muller became more sensible. The new beer had betrayed him. His handbag was so heavy that it seemed to contain stones; indeed I should not have been at all surprised to find stones in that strange receptacle, so much had the man's pinchbeck manners impressed me. His haughty airs were sheer foppery, with large cracks here and there: a pose in which there was no art. Exhausted and stuffed with all that rich food, as soon as we entered the empty house, whose keys I had with me, he sank down on the staircase, the sole piece of architecture that resembled a seat. Out of his case then emerged heavy porcelain bowls from Rouen, in bright thick colors. He explained to me the difference between these and the vases of Urbino. Growing more placable he rambled on with a pedantic air about his collection of pottery. When he spoke of his books, he recalled that he had sold them, sold them; yet just as a number of books were still left, he still had some fine bits of porcelain with which "to waylay and buy many a heart," he said, abjectly and quite shamelessly, I thought.

"I've brought this to give to your parents," he said, placing the object that so heavily weighed down his bag on one of the steps of the staircase. I searched for some spot in the house where the vases would be safe; it con-

tained no article of furniture save a little ladder and some shelving for potted plants. On this I placed the Rouen ware.

We visited the house which had, it seemed to me—and so I told him—far too many rooms.

"Perhaps . . . you are right."

"How many are you?" I asked. He hesitated. He seemed to be uncertain and I gathered that he would be alone.

"Yes," he went on. "Can you get a good servant here?"

"I don't know."

"If the house is too big I can rent rooms."

"No, that isn't the custom at Rupel. The landlord, afraid of having his house lose its reputation, wouldn't allow it."

"Even to friends?" I made a gesture of ignorance.

Having imbibed nothing but water I seemed less hazy in my thinking than usual. The supreme bliss to which I aspired at that moment was to get rid of Muller. We went downstairs again. I opened a glass door connecting the veranda with the garden. At the far end of the garden peaches glistened, hanging from the espalier nailed to the wall. Some of the fruit, lacking tender hands to pluck it, had fallen down into the grass, which had grown long and wild, and was being eaten by worms. The peaches still clinging to the trees offered themselves, as lovely as the useless breasts of brown-skinned virgins before fecundation, which serves them as time does the medlar. "I should like to offer them to Mademoiselle d'Ardennes," he said, showing that he knew about our

family. At his request I fetched some of the Rouen pottery and dropped the fruit I gathered into them.

Some peaches still remained at the top of the espalier. I fetched the small ladder while he went into the house with one of the filled dishes. In the second I heaped up a pyramid of rose-amber globes.

When I reached the top of the ladder and looked over the wall I was transfixed: Antoinette reading at her window, just as she had been accustomed to do years before. The young girl in blue, the Immaculate Virgin of the procession, a delicate pastel of a young girl seen in profile. A slightly curved nose, an uplifted chin that quivered at the slightest breath of emotion, and a narrow convex brow. I was so close to this apparition of grace that I could see the tiny veins that flowed under the velvety surface of her eyelid, and also the lucent curve of the iris—almost too large; and although from this angle I could not distinguish the color of that eye I remembered that it was blue, changing from dark blue to a violet periwinkle blue according to the light that sifted through the long brown lashes. But the lips formed the miracle of that face; they were full, separated by a narrow slit cleanly made as with the rounded end of a sculptor's *ébauchoir*. Her neck, now free of the horrible high collar of the period, exquisitely round and beautifully modeled, white and almost straight, was as I had imagined it the evening before. Her pink hands seemed to be palpitating with a sort of mute spiritual breathing. Lovely long hands of pale rose color are more likely to conquer hearts without aesthetic conventions than hands white as those of marble statues.

This was the first time that at the sight of a woman I felt a burning tide pass over my heart. I trembled. My body clung to the ladder, devoid of strength and oblivious. Only when I heard footsteps behind me did I put back from that tumultuous voyage undertaken by my soul into the seas of unknown bliss. Suddenly I discovered myself perched at the top of a ladder two yards away from a living profile, one belonging to my own world.

Climbing down the ladder I felt a clean, quick pang stab my heart. I understood then that I was, like every naif man at least once in his life, "wounded with love." My soul was so saturated with the vision that had possessed my guileless being, inexperienced as yet in love, that I passed a dreary evening with a repulsive baron who accepted the invitation to dine with us which I had made, as it were, at the end of a pole, hesitating out of a sense of politeness. Marthe had left her room where one of her terrible headaches kept her lying prone in the darkness. That morning after my departure, Anne's condition had alarmed the doctor who had been talking of the French Riviera. Her governess roamed aimlessly through the first-floor rooms.

The three of us dined together: Mademoiselle Alice, pleasant, animated, and Muller, having grown civil again, was urbane and correct in his manners. He modulated his voice and assumed the air of a mediocre young artist in the presence of his mediocre but celebrated masters. I must have been awkward, hampered by the idea that I was soiling the vision that had come to be locked up within me, and of which I was the

B

supreme rabid guardian. Muller wrapped himself in a cloud of whimsies, having drunk well of my father's old wines, prudently restraining himself a bit in order to keep within the confines of what the governess considered "amusing." This only increased my disgust for him. For although he was in better command of his pose than in the morning, it made him appear even more unspeakably foul. Even today, in spite of the feeling of horror which rises in me, that chokes and tortures me when I think of Muller, I am obliged to say that even with his pleasant manners and carefully thought-out blandishments, Muller was vile that evening.

At dessert, forgetting for whom he had destined them, Muller made away with one of the dishes of peaches. He knew five ways of eating this fruit, and several other fashions belonging to times past. He peeled some of them for the governess, toward whom he had assumed the equivocal attitude either of the young father or of the elderly relation who had, when she was a little girl, borne her on his shoulders. Thus he could exert himself without constraint to please her. Eternal conqueror that he was, he thoroughly enjoyed his calling, and probably made some headway with people of a more responsive spirit than mine, less pigheaded or merely less disgusted than I was.

You could not talk with this person who had seen the world, as he put it, and who had gone through fortune after fortune, had practised six professions, all first-rate, excellent and distinguished. He showed no reluctance to dwell on the fatal incline of the truth, nor to tell tales in which he seemed to have played a shady rôle.

The veracious anecdote finished (he had perhaps been roundly kicked or chased away shamefully by servants) he would assume a sober air. Then fearful lest the brilliant exploits he invented be tarnished he stared at us with malice worthy of a patriarch who has wandered through life without staining it, whose glory was pure and changeless. With a pitying look, he would say triumphantly:

"Now confess that you were about to believe that story?"

The governess, laughing, would twist her lips until they looked like a turkey's bottom. No, how could he believe such a thing? As for me, I had an impulse to cuff them both, to add a number of trophies to his collection of kicks. This disposition to parley with my arms and legs came to me in Rupel where no other language spoke so consummately or was better obeyed. Surely a dangerous course of nervous reaction in a person "without morals."

Muller then offered one of his Rouen dishes to the young woman. Shamelessly the old scoundrel murmured that he had a lovelier one for my parents. As I did not smile, he offered me the other dish.

How I wanted that interminable evening to end!

He mentioned that his train would be leaving in an hour, and asked for pen and ink. From his shrunken leather bag, the widow of his porcelains, he drew a sheet of paper which bore his letter-head, and began to write. He lifted his head when the maid entered with the coffee and gazed at her like a love-sick dog. She

lowered her eyes, quite enchanted. Muller got up and said:

"Here's something I've written to thank your father for his trouble today, for having so kindly delegated you to look out for me!"

He read the letter which in resonance and fulsomeness was much inferior to his talk. It sounded like a southern wine-grower's advertisement. The maid stood about doing I don't know what, then went out, her head in a daze. When she took something to Marthe, a moment later, she said, overcome with awe:

"He is a poet, mademoiselle. He's written a beautiful poem. He speaks of everybody, of Monsieur, of Madame, of you, everybody." Marthe removed her hand from her forehead just long enough to make a gesture of dismissal.

"Take good care of this message," he remarked, as I was about to put his precious letter down on the serving table.

At last he went off. I pretended to have a violent headache.

"Ah, dear young fried, it's the water, too much water. You drank too much water at lunch. It's terribly indigestible. Water makes you hate men, as fishermen loathe fish."

"I believe you," I said, while Alice, the governess, in the midst of silent effusions, looked at me, convinced that I was a sort of reptile who was never satisfied.

Muller was not to return as soon as he had expected to. Living with the glorious wound I have already mentioned and with the poignant disillusionment I am go-

ing to tell about, I forgot him completely until he reappeared.

I was in no mood to contemplate the stars that night. My cave-man instincts asserted themselves and, without even washing—as though water were an enemy of my love-fever—flung myself into my bed, with the one desire of burying myself, to hide, so that my heart might be wholly filled with the new tidings. This instinct to cower away from hostile things, even from the breathings of nature, would have made a coward of me if my aggressiveness, my unhealthy sensibility to injuries and my inclination to use my fists had not prevented it. Only creatures more intelligent than I can experience the fear which is bred of cowardice.

My bed was too hot. I sat up in the dark to try to focus the new image. That poisonous evening had cheated me out of my walk. The image stayed in my mind as the very vision which produced it, an emotion aroused by a pure and ardent profile, starred in my thought as a snowball, flattening against a wall, forms a perfect star, as striking as a medallion in relief. The passage of time had not yet sifted any dust on it. It had taken its place in my thoughts as an icon is put in its niche, behind its bars. I had not as yet sounded the possibility of seeing it vanish, of watching it act according to its will or to my own. It loomed as a tremendous image, obliterating the world and its incertitudes. It was quite near, but did not possess a sense of locality. I did not think of Antoinette's age, of her aunts, of her daily life. It is only later that we learn that a woman sleeps, eats, rises, bathes and is forced to yield to the horrible call

of the viscera, which like bloody tender boiled beef suspended in the cage of the thorax, the gods have hung upon our bones.

Chin cupped in hand, the nails digging into my cheeks without my being aware, I stared at the lozenge of veiled light formed by the lowered blind in the framework of window-panes. That framework, a movable grille, seemed to enshrine a virgin idealized by ancient worshippers. In all novels dealing with love you will come across a hero who gazes at the lighted window of his mistress. Hence I pass on, the reader being the hero, if he happens to be a man. If the reader be a woman, all through that tryst of her lover, she stayed in her room, innocent as yet of the oncoming fiery nights to be woven into the woof of her days, until that first night when her arms would reach out of the window and meet other arms upraised, copying a watercolor by Maeterlinck or by a rank conjecturer.

Later the light was snuffed and the blind raised, baring a black cavern. Presently the moon poured through the bars, staining the windows steel-blue, blanching all the house-fronts, the bottom of the garden and, next door, carving with yellow beams the ladder Muller had not taken away from the wall against which I had balanced it. When the moon had made some headway in the velvety blue dark, grazing the windows with slant rays, the darkness in Antoinette's room had vanished. Through the iron bars, whence the moon had not yet withdrawn its glamor, I spied a faint rosy glimmer, the nightlamp that burns before the Virgin's image in the bedrooms of northern Catholic girls and in the vesti-

bules of lowly houses, among the grocers in Flanders just as in Rome, where an electric light sometimes takes the place of a candle or nightlamp; and it is no more absurd than the prayer-mill. This dim red light was the first intimation from cruel reality that it, after all, was preëminent.

I do not understand the piety that lights a candle at the foot of an image. Wherein does my ignorance of the unbeliever cut me off from Antoinette? If, I mused, that act is a gesture of love issuing from the same cell of the soul, from the same kindling of the blood as the other sort of love, then Antoinette is a love-woven tissue, and has been so since childhood. For a long space I lingered thus at the window, trying to conjure up what turn had been given to her mind by her two aunts, what aspiration to her heart. I dawdled there, lost in thought until a light appeared at the end of the vegetable garden, advancing steadily toward the stable built very close to our stables and separated from them only by a wall. The light was being carried by Cross Eyes, a flickering lantern, and moved along the path that used to etch itself blackly in winter against the white snow. The-Boy-with-the-Red-Handkerchief was going to sleep with him in the hayloft above the stable.

Nothing else stirred except the slow shadow of the trees, as the moon exerted itself to catch up with the sun, meanly and selfishly keeping up its priestly advance. My back ached and I went to bed, falling asleep almost at once. I am a bit ashamed to confess that exactly like the heroes of all sad human novels, I had a dream. I should not trouble to describe it, had it not

fragmentarily cropped up again and again in sleep ever since childhood, and up to the present, always at the same period of the year. Moreover, a far more compelling reason for setting forth the dream is that Marthe also figured in it and, more compelling still, it showed that evil larvae weaken whatever chance we have of living in a state of resigned wisdom, that is, *normally*.

The source of these periodic dreams, bringing about a recrudescent distemper at every fresh appearance, was a fantastic scene we had once witnessed in a travelling English theatre. Behind a net, monstrous reptiles soared, flew, squirmed and fought and devoured one another: green, black, all hideous with scales and shells, with wings and claws. We had drunk in this scene replete with genuine terror and a not altogether unpleasant alarm. The following night both of us were haunted by the most loathsome dreams. As for me, I woke up and talked wildly to my father and mother who had come running into my room on hearing my cries. I pointed to the terribly hairy snakes bristling with fangs, winging and swirling about my room, hiding in the crevices of doorways, confounding their coils with the maze of the bedclothes. As though playing a game in that orchestra of horrors, they crept out and oozed back through the keyholes like a refrain breaking out into a wail, ever retreating and ever returning. To calm my fears, my father stepped on the snake I pointed out, but the snake kept on corkscrewing through my delirium the same as before.

Marthe's dreams, like my own, waxed perfect with the addition of new data we furnished them. Having at

first beheld painted serpents, then real ones in zoological collections, we ourselves came at last to keep lizards in a box. Our dreams, aided by these experiences, grew to be more scientifically exact, although not less terrible. Nowaways since I have myself killed serpents in the Sabine, these reptiles, having come into such close contact with me, alas so fatally for them, are brought to the surface in my nightmares, surging out of the extravagant scene of my dreams.

One of these dreams brooded on my breast as soon as I had fallen asleep. As soon as I had made out the spawn of the marshes muffled in gloom, I also noticed that Antoinette, whom they had started to torture, was in the midst of them. Silent, she made not one gesture of suffering. I tried to rescue her from their slimy embraces. After I slew them, the serpents rolled spongily under my heel; my feet slid over slippery bodies void of reflex action, and I made my way slowly toward her. She did not turn her head. Her calm profile and bowed head seemed to be rapt in a book, or veiled like a virgin in a procession whom I saved from a fire that only momentarily hid the knots of reptiles. Or, again, an umbrella suddenly concealed her face and I saw nothing save a long gray-gloved hand. At last she was a lark singing. When, however, I had stumbled on the last of winged frogs, I observed that she had started reading again, with a happy attentive air, without noticing the monsters now reabsorbed into windmills and venerable oaks.

At the evocation of Antoinette's walk, which I have compared to that of a lark about to burst out singing,

my dream abruptly switched its setting, changing to a view of several mills whose picture was impressed on my mind. I started forward after I had picked up a wounded lark in a stubble field. I decided that it was merely giddy, drunk with the juniper berries which lined the road. Next dung, colored like dark red paint, stained my fingers and I became convinced then that its drunkenness was due to wild raspberries. I was seized by a great anxiety. I knew that the stain was not blood; but the small bird seemed to be exposed to a terrible menace. Giving me a trustful look, he flew away, taking me along with him. The pair of us flew through the darkness which had suddenly descended, toward Antoinette's closed window. The little reddish glow was poised there motionless but the room itself took the form of an endless corridor with, at the far end, a point of light where the figure of a woman moved rapidly. I opened the window bars. We passed through, flew up the vast corridor and emerged at the other end in full sunlight among the windmills.

There Antoinette paced quietly, and she looked exactly as when I had seen her in the same spot before. She was clad in blue. I approached her and held out the drunken bird to her. She unclosed her hand and the bird, set at liberty, darted away. We watched him for a long time, as if the first deviation in the series of circles he made would decide the fate of the world.

Dogs barked, running ahead of cartloads of vegetables drawn to the market. It was five o'clock, and I was awakened by the bark of the dogs pulling flat carts

loaded with round cabbages; then came the official noise of the steam tramway.

Antoinette's window was already open. I remembered that somebody had said that she helped her father take care of the church. This incomparable creature, I thought, arranged the chairs in expectation of sweating bigots whose clothes smelled foully of urine.

XVI

My mother, recalled by a telegram, arrived on the first train. She went to the doctor's; then finding me at home, she and I made preparations for Anne's departure. Anne was to spend several quiet weeks in the most healthful spot in the country, on the edge of the Campine, near the hills I have spoken of, with her old nurse in her fairy-tale house.

"Has your father's friend come?" my mother asked, while she was packing a trunk. "What's he like?"

I stared at her. "Yes," she said before I had a chance to speak, "I knew from certain polemic monographs that he was either an angel or a horrible and dangerous worm!" It was my mother, one might fancy, who had perhaps inculcated in me my vehement habits of speech.

"I think this dish is for you," I said, showing her the Rouen pottery. "The other one belongs to the governess."

"To Alice?" said my mother, surprised. "By the way, I have to give her notice that we needn't count any longer on her 'intelligent care, etc.,' of Anne." The governess, as we called her among ourselves, thinking thus to increase the distance between us, was sent for, came, and grasped my mother's reasons perfectly. She made her adieux at once since my mother, Anne and I had to leave the house in a few minutes. Before taking her

Rouen bowl, she drew from her pocket a small notebook and copied down Muller's address from his letter which I had left on the serving-table. When she had gone out, my mother questioned me with a glance.

"She took down Muller's address," I said.

"Maybe she expects to find a place with him?"

"Yes," I said.

Arrived at the old nurse's house, we installed Anne in the sole bedroom. The nurse promised to sleep in the attic, so as to be only two or three yards away from the sick girl, who was so weak, so exhausted by nervous tension, that she was somewhat eased at the notion of not seeing Alice nor any of us. While we were having hot milk and eggs, Anne, whose soul was too mature for her age, had already regained a bit of her serenity precisely because she wasn't going to see us any more, and she began making plans for the winter: sleigh rides with mother; promises to learn how to skate so that she might go with us. I can detect the effects of fever in an ardent face like Marthe's; but in Anne's relaxed features, still childlike, it seemed a trifle strange and quite incompatible with her unhealthy languor, her indifference. She seemed a bird dreaming of arctic regions, being borne away to the tropics where it will surely die.

My mother, knowing Anne to be absolutely safe and that my father did not want to bear the responsibility of Sylvia's tricks, returned that very evening to Dieppe. The household was thus reduced by two persons: Anne and Alice.

Coming back, I ran into Trim. He was changed in my eyes, although I could not divine why.

"My mother came," I said, "otherwise I'd have brought back some of your books."

"You needn't hurry. I don't expect to leave before the thirtieth of the month. This is only the beginning." What ailed him? I thought. And reluctant to accept once and for all that brusque change of attitude that froze me, I said again:

"Baron Muller left last night." Trim explored my face with eyes less luminous than those I had come to admire so much. Apparently he wished to reassure himself that I had not set a trap for him. I did not, then, decipher that look. I know now that he hesitated because Muller had only left that morning after a night of debauch with which everybody henceforth linked me. But Trim's grievance against me had to do with something else, and was more justified, he believed.

"It's not my business to give you a dressing down," he said with reserve, "but by making a complaint against the girl you acted badly." He strode away, muttering an insulting *au revoir*.

"Explain yourself!" I cried, made desperate by the attitude of the vagabond gentleman whom I had grown to prize highly ever since our first encounter. And here he was at our third meeting, repulsing me with a look of scorn from his admirable eyes. A pang of sadness lay on my heart at this, whereas the attitude of Rupel merely revolted me.

Trim did not turn round. When the maid opened the door for me, she said with a sorrowful air: "Mlle. R (Alice) has left."

"I know," I said, walking in.

"She was so nice. In the evening we used to chat in her room."

"You were friends?" I said. She did not offer to relieve me of my hat and cane.

"If I dared, I'd tell monsieur that I'm going to leave too. The house is going to be sad again. If I dared—I'd say that it wasn't right for you to have made a complaint against her."

"A complaint?"

"Against Mlle. R.," she said astonished. I could make nothing of this conversation which, being distracted, I allowed to ramble on. I started toward my room.

"Mademoiselle would like to know if you'd care to take tea with her and Mme. Verbeck."

On the first landing of the winding stairway I ran into Fernand whom I stared at without offering him my hand. Ever since I was ten years old I could summon an impetuous look to my eyes, which rose to the surface whenever I was about to give way to dangerous impulses. Two paces away from my sister's door, esteeming himself safe, Fernand made a grimace of disdain and disgust: a small dog, safe in the arms of a spinster, will bark like a bulldog.

"Your not shaking hands with me," he said, "makes it easier for me to break squarely with you."

"That's more than I could hope for, coward!" He drew back.

"I want to steer clear of the clique you go around with at night," he replied. This was the reply to be expected of the man who, after having been satisfied at a

house of prostitution, went all around town telling tales about my escapade in Bouillon.

"Ah, I understand," I said, thinking only of the invisible secret of my sleepless nights, interrupted by the suave dream of a lark bursting into song.

I let him pass by me, wondering, however, if it were not evidence of the degeneration of my pride that I did not there and then add two more blows to the number he had already received from me during his career of the virtuous scholar.

Louise, now Madame Verbeck, stopped speaking when I entered my sister's room. She seemed to be urging her to ask me to bear witness to something.

"The whole town's talking about Mme. Colen," Louise announced. I wondered if her husband had told her where he had, so to speak, assisted at the birth of the scandal, and that I was present when Colen first began to get suspicious.

"Big things rarely happen here," I said to her, putting into that statement a cynicism I really did not own then.

"I knew you'd say that," she cried, slightly amused, "but how disastrous for those who love her!"

"Are there many who love her?" Marthe asked.

"Those who love her will rejoice in her happiness, the others will envy her," I said viciously. Louise said, smiling:

"It's very funny and maybe quite true. Many," she replied to Marthe's question; then to me: "Think of the figure they'll cut, going through the streets, with that scandal written on their faces."

"They'll be important at least this once in all their lives," I said, still playing the same rôle.

"You don't put any stock in the respect of your fellow citizens!" she cried, coquettishly putting on a pompous air, the absurdity of which she accented lightly.

"Dear friend," I cried, mimicking her ridicule and inclining it toward the lugubrious, "if we'd ever put stock in it, we'd have died long ago of disillusionment!"

"That's true, Louise," Marthe could not refrain from saying.

Silence fell. Louise did not wish to stir the ashes of memories which she felt to be rather sinister.

"What do they accuse Mme. Colen of?" Marthe demanded with her hesitant voice, naturally modulated.

"Of showing herself too often in the young man's company. It's known where they meet and when. . . . Don't you really know anything about it?" she asked.

"No."

Louise left. I saw my sister's guest to the door. "I'm going to pick my brother up at the Toow tea," she said, as an excuse for leaving so soon. Near the door I said:

"Fernand and I have had a falling out for good."

"What . . . ?" Louise breathed.

"He insulted me. I shall never speak to him again."

"Ah, that business about Alice!" she exclaimed. "You overdo things. You see life as a series of tragedies that drag you all, one by one, into their sanguinary circles. You're a blacker sort of Hamlet or King Lear. . . ."

"A sort of Flibbertigibbet!" I put in. Her sudden flush made me regret my vindictive feelings.

"I overdo things. Very well," I said just to put an

end to our embarrassed silence, "but what's this business that you talk about?"

"I didn't think it was you," she answered. "It would be too ugly."

"Upon my word, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ask Marthe. We were speaking about it when you came in."

As soon as she had gone, I went upstairs to rejoin Marthe.

"All of them are boring me about some dark business. I just learned that it has to do with Alice."

"They're stupid," Marthe said. "You're supposed to have amused yourself swinishly all night long with one of your friends," she said with an indefinable nuance of reproach in her tone. "With that friend and Alice," she added.

"Ah, Marthe," I cried, "if you only knew how I passed last night!"

"But I don't know," she said.

"You know, don't you, that I won't keep it from you, that I'll taste the deepest pleasure when I describe it to you in all its details."

"Poor Mme. Colen!"

"Yes. How immoral we are!"

"We've been badly brought up. She certainly loves that young professor, doesn't she?" she added with anxiety, as if she were eager to be just.

"I believe that what she made up her mind to lose by loving him, should be worth more to her than to us. She should—in that case, it seems to me, *love* him."

"Yes, we've been brought up carelessly, without morals," she repeated. Then in an anxious tone: "Why do you say 'it seems to me'?"

"Did I say that?"

"You did. It hurts. Much more than what you intend telling me about last night."

"Yes," I said, immensely surprised at her instinct for divination.

Just then the dinner gong sounded. Marthe went downstairs with me. A cover was laid for her. We ate together, and spoke no more of Mme. Colen or myself.

About to part that evening, she turned to me and said quite low: "I'd like to talk with you."

"I'll go in with you now," I volunteered.

"No, wait. Soon. . . . I'll let you know . . . tomorrow . . . in a few days."

I kissed her tenderly on both cheeks. Immobile she stood in the shadow outside the door. Then she returned my kisses. Her lips were icy, especially the perfect one.

XVII

In the region of my epigastrium, throughout the whole of that vile day, burned the "bowl of fire" closely resembling sexual indigestion, a sickness that follows the first hours of "amorous combat" with a new mistress, or the first nights of marriage which, unlike those other first nights, are not frowned upon on the tariff list of confessionals. The burning sensation I felt seemed to be located higher, in the heart itself, and not in the epigastrium. The latter results from a wear-and-tear of nerves that abet caresses and condition them, a wear-and-tear carried to the point of inflammation. The others arise from the warmth of the blood which, at that age, I knew only in the form of "platonic" love.

Even as the vision of the profile I had caught and buried within me, that *bowl of fire* (the *afflicted pyloris* of Mme. de Mortsauf) burned all day long without arousing in me thoughts of love, just as the original image had persisted without relief, bowed over a book. My morbid modesty forbade me to hold the image up in broad daylight. That would bring it too close to the corrosive horrors interwoven with my life. At nightfall I came upon it again, when the slanders and meannesses of the day had been put to rest by darkness. At daybreak I leapt to the window: she was working at something, her hands on her knees. I could not make out

what it was. Her window was shut and the iron bars, which she opened during the day, were disposed in such a way that, viewed *en enfilade*, they formed a compact mass permitting me only a glimpse of her divine profile, gentle, full of energy, and of her hands. I was sunk in reverie the better part of the morning, during which the cares of the day flowed back slowly.

At breakfast I asked the maid how she knew that the governess had gone away two nights ago. Mademoiselle R. had told her herself. That satisfied me. She wanted, clearly, to add something, but I fixed her with a fleeting look only too well known to everybody. Muller's address, I reflected, would be of more and better use to her than the Rouen bowl.

I inquired about Marthe and learned that she had slept well. I was convinced that this was a falsehood, like the "Good day" we all exchange in the streets.

With books in my arms, I went out into the garden by the big green door which had not been locked for a long time with a key, but by a latch fastened to the painted boards. The key, coated with flourishing rust, never left the nail on the pantry board.

At the crest of the yellow-sanded hill, threads of violet shadow fluted the foliage. The swallows nursed the last brood of their young. All the birds chattered, the songs of the love season having given way to a delightful volubility. Toward the fields of pulse and the sands, the ripe foliage wafted a resinous scent, subtler than that of May blossoms. I chose a spot mildly sheltered by a sweet-briar bush where fruit, already ruddy-cheeked, ripened alongside the last pink blossoms. Seven

thorny stems lifted this bright cluster two feet above the sand. Seating myself beside the ardent candelabra, I suddenly spied the lovely startled face of Antoinette. As I drew near and stood there, the seated figure was hidden by the clump of sweet-briar; but now that I was seated, nothing was between us save the thorny stems stripped of their leaves. I remained sitting, without casting a look in her direction, opening the first book on the pile I had brought with me. She went on reading. According to certain rules tacitly admitted, but not according to the beautiful laws of forests and streams, I should have left and sought a parasol of flowers farther away.

She looked at me. A glance of the eyes is made up of a fascicle of as many million rays as we have emotions, thought-emotions, that one day drift down into our hearts. The things belonging to pure reason, to science, are not reflected by its rays; they have their place, I believe, on labels in the long gallery of our brains. A beautiful glance, that of an impassioned criminal or of a great rhymeless poet, is so compact, so numerous that it makes us lower our lids, provided always that the beautiful glance is unconscious, which it fails generally to be save in rare intimacy, save in a moment of male love wherein the spirit believes itself triumphantly flesh. The thief like the genius lowers his eyelids.

One of the rays in Antoinette's fascicle was familiar to me. I beheld in it the glint of a very old emotion linked with the night of the fire when, coming out of her fainting spell while she was being carried to our landlord's, she had cast a certain glance at me, mocking

me and herself at that instant. Next to that glance I remember catching another, a fragile gleam, far more obscure and not so energetic. It was not pity but love, energized by all the tenderness love may contain. Viewed at closer quarters today, this gleam of love could be more easily isolated from the others. It was the same that joined itself to a fugitive dart of reproach at the time of our recent meeting near the hills. It had also pierced through the veil of the Immaculate Virgin—I knew it now—although the expression on her face had been hidden from me then. Describing a look is like describing water.

Antoinette glanced at my book and at my hands; then our glances crossed and both of us read the same emotion.

According to the law of the forests, this was the instant when the sylvan creature, stigmatized with the marks of the male, cuts a reed, fashions it into a thing of music and pipes before the female, white, blonde and blue, until night falls; both creatures made by a generous god, drink from a spring and eat of sunny fruit, before gathering the fruit that comes at the end of a day devoted to song. We were on the top of the old mill knoll, facing the tobacco factory. I was the son of an aristocrat who had fallen on the evil days of an army surgeon. The female was the sacristan's daughter; their house was in plain view, close to the church of Sainte Clotilde. But this time revolt was unable to muster a wild army in my heart where a fantastic baggage, packed with promises and love-lays, weighed everything down. I rose and strode off like a madman, bearing away

with me no longer the impress of a profile, but a body amorous of my body. It is what might be called the *real presence*, just that and nothing more.

On my way home I did not miss my books left lying on the field where nature had won such a cunning victory. From my window, motionless with delirium, my heart beating loudly, I kept on surveying a luminous point on the knoll: Antoinette. When she rose and went away, that galling yet delightful season of anguish and beatitude started, during which every second we do not catch the sweet ray in the eyes of our beloved is a dark night of the deaf and dumb and blind.

After lunch, Antoinette being neither at her window nor on the knoll, impatience drove me to wander restlessly through the house. Unable to stay on the balcony I suggested to Marthe that we try a walk in the country. Since she was strong enough now, she consented.

"Besides," I said to her, using a stratagem that had become vain, "you want to talk to me anyway."

"Not yet. You must tell me what's troubling you and whom you're in love with."

"You know I could not keep it from you. Let's walk along the river."

I had nothing to disclose to Marthe. With a small basket in her hand, Antoinette was coming back, walking along the green dyke. When she was twenty paces away, taking my arm and reclining on it lovingly, Marthe studied Antoinette who was now quite near and said:

"How lucky you are! How beautiful she is! There's something wonderful in her which I've seen before."

Marthe reached out her free hand and clasped Antoinette's charming fingers. The three of us were crimsoning with shyness and love. We had no impulse to break the silence. People passed by, but they had no power to shatter the trance of paralyzing bliss. Marthe, who was used to thinking, to reflecting with a swiftness purloined from her speech, withdrew sympathetically, not to rouse us. Without letting go of our hands, she kept her eyes on us in a transport of happiness. A few minutes afterward a tow-horse forced us to move from the spot and an expression of curiosity came into Marthe's face, in her look of the wretched outcast. She seemed to ache to discover what the signs of love were made of, and where they were born, those signs which illumined our faces. Such a thirst to understand had surged up in her eyes, mixed with a candor so deep, that I did not scruple to compare it to the primitive feeling reappearing in the child who, wanting to get at the mechanism, disembowels a puppet, provided he doesn't believe that it is instinct with a life more golden and more powerful than that of his omnipotent elders.

"You're charming," Marthe said. "Is it because you're both so attractive that you love one another? No one can love without being beautiful . . ." she added without realizing what she was saying.

Antoinette let that rankling phrase, thought aloud by my disfigured sister, pass from us, then she kissed Marthe tenderly. But those words had brewed a drop of poison in our love; often they were to wrap it with a melancholy that is like the anguish hovering above an

enchanting garden next door to an insane asylum, a prison or a hospital.

Marthe choked back her tears and said, trying to bring us back to ourselves:

"Has Pierre told you how badly we were brought up . . . how immorally . . . ?"

"We've never talked about that," Antoinette replied, smiling like Joconda, before Joconda had begun to smile for everybody.

"Already so deep in love!" Marthe exclaimed. This was not the first time I surmised that for Marthe love was more closely bound up with carnal things than it is for many young girls who, although they feel the outward spasms of sex, nevertheless persist in bizarrely ensconcing love in seraphic gardens, where the kiss is the most precise and most ultimate of contacts.

"But," I said, completing Marthe's previous sentence in an effort to remove the painful feeling which, I knew, was bound to crop up in my sister's presence, "Antoinette knows that we have no religious belief."

"Yes," Antoinette said.

"Are you a believer?" Marthe asked. It was like a question on some extremely exact subject, and one that was quite new, although on this head Marthe had brooded long in secret.

"Of course I'm a believer," she replied. "I was brought up very religiously, as you know—here and with my aunts."

"But is yours the faith that offers you heaven before you die?" Marthe persisted.

"Yes, it's that faith," Antoinette said, "but it's noth-

ing to my credit. I'm supposed to have it, whereas, my aunts believe, I should be censured for my doubts. Can you make that out?"

"Yes, if faith is what people say it is," we answered, almost in the same words, Marthe and I.

"Ah, but that is of no consequence. I don't understand it at all. I understand nobody—at least I've never met anybody. My aunts agree on only one point: to force on me whatever seems just and whatever seems unjust, protesting meanwhile that they only want me to be happy. But ever since I was a child I've come to believe that they themselves desire nothing. Really, they haven't any personal desires. At seventy they're just as they were at my age. There's nothing they care to do."

"How about you?" Marthe asked.

"Yes," said Antoinette, "I want to do things, if only to act like an idiot."

"Not like an idiot!"

"You're right. Maybe like a degenerate. . . ."

"No," I said in my turn. "Neither idiot nor degenerate is what you mean. But I don't know what words to substitute in their place. Have you read Stendhal?" I asked Antoinette.

"Yes, that was part of my prohibited reading." We were surprised, although we hadn't an inkling as to what reading the church permitted. As she said this, she fished from the bottom of the basket the books I had left on the knoll. "Books like these," she added, handing them to me.

"Do you remember the kind of people he calls bastards?"

"Yes," she said.

"If you're to live outside of social monstrosities, you've got to be the opposite of them, a rebel."

"Yes," she returned with a lovely toss of her beautiful head. That was our spiritual pact and we never again spoke of what was beautiful or ugly without remembering that we had uttered these important words, placed them at the base of our emotional harmony. Only once, at the end of that very day, when I followed Antoinette into church to watch her admiringly while she moved about her duties, did she ask me in a low rapid voice, as we stood near a pillar, if it was right that we should see each other in that spot consecrated to the love of God. I told her that I had never known the love of God, that there was but one love. She nodded her head energetically, saying yes, gazing at me with eyes so much kindled with truth, with sheer beauty, that I realized that, like the beautiful immaculate virgin she was, she would neither deny nor refuse the flaming gifts of the devil.

When night folded about the church, I left to rejoin Marthe who was waiting for me, as we had arranged before we had taken our walk with Antoinette. A loathsome worm of a priest looked at me. Two roughnecks were singing.

I sat in a chair facing Marthe's fauteuil, and opposite us was the illumined framework of Antoinette's window which, with its grille, resembled a golden honeycomb. Marthe said to me, pursuing the thought in her mind on my arrival:

"Would you love her as much if she belonged to somebody else?"

"I don't know."

"That sort of thing's not impossible. . . . Madame Colen, you know. . . ."

"Yes, she belongs to somebody else. That's so. Do you know Monsieur Colen?" I asked.

"No. Do you mean that they don't love each other?"

"She doesn't love him, I daresay."

"Then she must have told him, she must have told her husband, don't you think?" I could not refrain from smiling at this certainty of judgment uttered with such simplicity.

"Why don't they leave each other?" Marthe resumed. I indicated that I did not know. After a lapse of several moments, while her face grew grave, alternately flushing and turning livid, her whole countenance seemed to subside in the depth of her chair, and she added in a frail voice:

"Do they kiss on the mouth?"

"Why . . . yes."

"Pierre, can people love without kissing on the mouth? I'm not a child," she went on, "but in love there's one thing I don't know only because I'm a young girl. . . . Is it possible without kisses, I mean with kisses on the mouth?" I fathomed her horrible thought. "Don't be afraid to tell me. You said you'd always love me. . . . Don't deceive me. . . . Tell me," she ended, putting her hand on my arm. She does not yet know, or at any rate she believes that the barrier between her and the rest of the world, I reflected, is not insurmount-

able! How was I to answer? Even if I had been more canny, if I had read more, can any one tell me what I should have answered? Moreover, neither she nor I were prepared to expatiate on such a theme, to divide it into its separate parts and to submit it to analysis.

Marthe's emotion seemed terrible. Her breathing came audibly. Whatever confidence I had was in myself alone, and I knew that my lips at that moment held the fragile happiness of days to come. A procession of days were yet to pass before the frightful truth was to become apparent to her; but on the brink of the precipice Marthe, beyond doubt, already felt her illusion fade. She examined herself like a sick person given up by the doctors, as the phrase goes, while her hand did not arrest its insistent pressure of my arm, and her black eyes sought mine with their gentle, clinging and inexorable look.

"It's too much. . . . I am asking too much, I know. . . . But," she added in a strained voice, "We know that I haven't got a . . ." She could not bring the word out. She simply pointed, like a phantom, to her phantom mouth. Beautiful was her body and her eyes were wonderful. Yet she could not be kissed on the mouth, not even as a leper could be kissed, who sometimes at least is not without a pair of lips.

XVIII

Mid-September. I sat in the garden with my mother, that day dressed in black. Struck by the harrowed look on her face, I centered my gaze on her with an anxiety that was but heightened by the ill-concealed passionateness with which she burst out:

"Pierre, don't you trust me?"

"I trust nobody but you," I said, putting my arms about her and kissing her; not for sentimental reasons. I was trying to allay the distress written on her face. Then I went on to say:

"No . . . Marthe is the only one I trust as much as I do you." My mother had long known (she may have always known it) that I could not lie as to what I felt toward my father.

"That's what I wanted to hear. I am grateful," she said. "Now I should like to ask a favor of you. You can relieve me of a good deal of anxiety," she resumed, her look again troubled, wandering. . . . "Every time you pass that way . . . no, that's not what I mean. . . . Will you go at least once a day and have a look at Anne's grave? Just to see that the earth hasn't been freshly disturbed." I surmised her train of thought. She went on:

"If I mentioned this to your father, he'd think me mad." As far as this subject went, my father, ostensi-

bly, would not have been far wrong. I surveyed her, my arms still wound about her: the thin shoulders, the burning eyes sunk deep in the orbits whose faded brown skin and the bitter folds about her mouth gave her face, pitilessly, a hardened look, aged it and touched her silhouette with pathos. All the horrors borne since that morning when we crossed the churchyard, while the dogs whined and barked, every single perfidy, every insult, the very least of these outrages, had weighed heavily on her soul, had dropped a leaden ache on her heart and fastened ugly claws whose irremediable scars I had just forlornly laid bare.

"I fear for Marthe. When we returned from Dieppe, I found her crying every time she was left alone. Tears made her feel better, but now she doesn't confide in me any longer. She says nothing. I am uneasy about her. What does she tell you? I can't make her out any longer. Never before has she hidden things from me, but now I can only fear for. . . ."

I kissed my mother again. She asked me to talk to Marthe and I was to tell her afterward what I thought secretly ailed her.

"I shall go to the cemetery," I said.

"I've already been there today, but go anyhow." She fell into a silence, the selfsame silence from which, since Anne's funeral, she had rarely emerged.

I went away. With a pang of despair I turned round to gaze at that thin despoiled figure dressed in black. To this level they had reduced my mother's intelligence, *they*, the citizens of Rupel, all the crafty hypocrites and priests. At that instant, although I am unable to

account for it, the thought of Antoinette rushed into my mind confused with a deep sense of upheaval, of revolt, somehow bound up with the spirit of revenge.

The "dogs' " plot in the cemetery was entered by a gate as rusty as the key to our garden. Anne's grave was intact, waiting for the stone to be erected. I came back home by way of the roundabout mill road, for I wanted to draw out the interval of being alone, so that I could fix my black thoughts on the subject of my mother's wandering mind. Not till that evening would I see Antoinette, for we had to give up our meetings in the daytime. The whole town appeared to be in league, forming a vigilant and impassable guard around us two. A walk would give me time to collect myself. I did not know what things were going to happen, but I had a presentiment that great changes were destined to take place in our world, changes that were inevitable. When I reached the second mill, the first to be passed on this stroll, I caught sight of Trim sitting on the same plateau where I had run into him several weeks ago. His face was turned toward me. He made no movement, but with barely lifted hand he greeted me as you might greet an old friend with whom you have broken in a rather amiable fashion.

One word, I believed, would have sufficed to exonerate me. But whether it was due to the feeling which always prevented me from defending myself, or whether I was at a loss for the one irrefutable word needed to cleanse me of vileness, or whether I did not want to show how inordinately I valued his opinion of me; or whether, finally, some cautious streak in me whispered that he

was in no position to pass judgment on me, a judgment which could touch me to the quick—I sauntered by, returning his greeting which, although he did not suspect it, had none the less cut me to the heart.

I reddened with shame or cowardice. I cannot tell which. What I myself felt I attributed to him and, just to make him fit into the rôle I had prepared for him, I exaggerated the mild scorn I entertained toward him. Quite unfairly, I included him in the revulsion I felt for Muller, but this was only to serve my immediate purpose. The impression those two had left upon me of a quick sympathy between them during that famous dinner at the inn, prevented me—it must be borne in mind that I knew very little about Trim—from dissociating what I felt about him from what I felt about Muller. I cherished this unfair contempt for no good reason, but with it I managed to combat the thousand contradictory sensations, at once so sweet and new, arising from the fact that I refused to utter the two necessary words that would have cleared me of all suspicion. I was filled with a sort of rancor against him because he had somehow uncovered this weakness in the deepest recesses of my heart.

Back in the streets of the town, I spied the major, the red Diver, just in front of me. Suddenly he swerved from the sidewalk and I thought he was about to cut me, but, seeing him turn his eyes almost imperceptibly toward someone behind me, headed the same way as myself, I concluded that he aimed to sidestep the other person. Glancing round I saw that it was Muller, in his loose-hung clothes, carrying the black satchel "stuffed

with pieces of pottery," I supposed. He had come back that afternoon and the furniture was being unloaded in front of the house. Muller stopped. I crossed over. Thinking I wished to speak to him, the Diver could not quite avoid stopping and talking to me. This obligation gave him a chance to point a moral, whose drift I have forgotten.

"You know," he said, "that when you're older you'll have to be more careful in choosing your friends in a small town than in a big city." I thought to myself: I haven't a single friend left; and I watched the retreating back of the red monster, a back rounded by vulgarity and complacence in its vulgarity. A single friend. . . . I was wrong for Muller shouted to me:

"He meant me. But don't believe that patent official. You have a faithful friend in me." On seeing me part from the Major he retraced his footsteps. On the evening of his notorious debauch he had been pointed out to the major.

"Here I am, back again. Depend on me. Tonight I am dining with you, and all my worries will be over. You'll help me tomorrow, won't you? Ah well, your father's old friend is chock full of expedients!" Thus he went on jesting, jarring my nerves to such an extent that I could scarcely resist the impulse to push him into the baker's cellar whose hot throat yawned right behind him. I never met a man so much beneath contempt. His neck fairly cried out for two firm hands to close about it.

"To prove to you that I'm a faithful friend, and a *useful* one too, this is for Trim," he said with a smile full of crapulous sarcasm, indicating the things in his

stuffed satchel. Trim, I thought. The memory of their night of debauch flowed back. That *Trim* I could understand. Meanwhile he had opened his satchel and showed me a pair of red leather house slippers with black heels.

"They're for him," he observed, with an easily imagined expression on his features.

I was taken aback. *That* had not yet appeared to me under an ignoble light. And, quite stupidly, I lost my temper over it, perhaps because he had betrayed Trim. It may have been because he showed me the house slippers with clear-cut intentions seething in his vulgar head; or it may have been because he stripped Trim of the glamor of poetry with which I had adorned him. But if Trim judged Muller to be a man, if he could bear the company of that fishwife without a sense of disgust, then, automatically, he supplied me with a cause for my contempt, contempt until then unjust. I took flight.

"Until this evening!" he cried after me. But he was wrong. My mother postponed his dining with us and then saw to it that it did not come off at all. When he arrived that evening, my father was there alone to greet him and he did not press Muller to dine. Several times afterward he called in the evening. My father, however, never mentioned him. He was glad enough, I think, not to display this friend, of whose true character he may have been innocent hitherto, but of which at this time he must have had some knowledge.

That evening I dressed with minute care, with all the coquetry of detail of which I was then capable. The gas

heater which only supplied water to the ground floor and which could not, moreover, accommodate more than one bath at a time, was reserved every evening for my father. Christine brought me a huge jug of boiling hot water, which I proceeded to pour into the English tub, regarded by my mother as indispensable in a house where, by the method of imitation, one tries to love England. I believe our tubs were the only ones in Rupel, where young women before taking a bath were wont to put on a chemise, at least in houses where bathing facilities existed. The evening bath is neither a potation nor a liqueur, but a revelling of the five senses, a revelling so inexact, however, that it can be likened to the psychic drunkenness induced by scent, by a chaste caress of the spirit or by an ablution of the soul. The swarthy intellectuals of the South err in despising this ablution; it is a thing of the spirit except that, while it lasts, the blood seems to course along the interior and exterior of the body, flowing along both sides of the skin. In my bath I sprinkled several drops of perfume, the name of which I have forgotten. Two odors drift in my memory, one is benzoin and the other I am unable to fix. At once the warm water assumed an opaline veining like the cloudy zone of color outlining the Tiber early in the morning, viewed from a distance of twenty kilometers. When I stirred the water, it became a vervein blue like Venetian cruets whence the wine had been drained off a hundred years ago. When I emerged from this candid water, I exuded a bucolic fragrance that would have sent a little Parisian mistress into peals of laughter, although she would not have refused my

young body, straight and firm, without a single blemish, unless it be that the shoulders were too bulky, as powerful as a piece of Etruscan terra cotta. When I stretched out in my bed I did not look like a box of matches, as I do today.

I put on a summer shirt, open at the throat, and sat down at the window, awaiting the prearranged signal. The mechanical side of my escapade offered me neither impediment nor danger. I had to pass through our garden unperceived, open the gate noiselessly, take several steps and then, with the key she had given me for that purpose, unlock the heavy grille that guarded Antoinette's window. As soon as she spied me, Antoinette would push up the window. Standing tiptoe I would swing myself into her room. Behind her room was an unused one, next a passageway leading to the kitchen, a drawing-room which also served as a dining-room, a third room, a vast sort of storage cupboard and then the laundry, such as may be found in the average farmhouse.

Braced against the church between two buttresses (it was the old sacristy which had been renovated into a dwelling) the house had a door on the upper storey leading straight into a recess of the church, whence you descended into the church itself by way of a stone staircase. The room was crowded with church objects, settings for processions, candelabra, supplies of candles and candle-moulds, prie-dieux covered with crimson velvet, the property of families who no longer live here. The second room, cut off from this one by the main stairway of the house, was the sacristan's. It was above his daughter's room but it had no window bars. Without

making a sound, almost without stopping to dress, he could run from this room into the church which was in his care.

I slipped down into the garden, impatient. Night had already fallen. Every single noise seemed to be the last sound of the day. A light was still burning in my mother's room. All our neighbors had put out theirs. In the kitchen, the meagre glimmer of a tiny gas-flame, half turned down, glowed uncertainly on Christine who was seated, her chin dropped on her bosom. When I paused near the kitchen, this priceless domestic woke up and came to the kitchen door.

"Is there something you want, sir?" she asked, peering into the shadow with her limpid eyes. She had observed my unusual preparations, the careful toilette which ordinarily I only half made in the evening, my shirt discarded after dinner, my tennis shirts left in great disorder after I had chosen one and, finally, the unaccustomed perfume of the bath water: all that she had seen with her own eyes, being without help that evening. She had vaguely explained to me that the maid had gone away, for which I had been warned by the girl's own words, and which I realized was so on the following day.

"Shall I wait up for you?" she asked in a low voice. I shook my head negatively, omitting the other sign which at the critical hour the hero makes to his confidante. I did not hurt her by putting my index finger to my mouth. I merely smiled when she turned out the flame. Carrying a candle in a picturesque lantern, she was about to tiptoe away when I said:

"Don't close that door."

I raised my head. In my mother's room only a night-lamp burned in the golden eye of its oil. I mounted the steps to my room. Antoinette's window was carven in the moonless night. Eleven o'clock struck.

When the lit-up frame was blotted in darkness, I went down again. The fever of the last minutes had suddenly left me. Up to that moment everything had been veiled by the tumultuous rhythm of my blood. I grew calm, commanding myself easily, as if I were about to cross a street lined with spectators who stared at me in silence. Three minutes more, and I was in Antoinette's room. Only the feeble votive light burned before the image of the Virgin. Antoinette closed the window bars and the blinds, then re-lit the lamp whose glow was sifted through the yellow silk shade.

Finding myself beside her in this sudden brilliancy, I trembled. She looked at me, her long hands resting on my Etruscan shoulders. Then she put a match to the kindling in the fireplace. This practical occupation, absorbing her but for an instant, gave me time to penetrate deeper into this new reality, where it was so hard for me to set foot after my sojourn in the all-powerful reality of the dream, built around Antoinette over a period of many days. Although she had had no experience, she was not disappointed but merely intrigued by my odd stiffness. She was unable to conjure up the arduous transposition which, in the foreground of authentic poetic illusion, the lover must effect so that he might endow his lady with the face of his love.

Reason watched over me. It urged me to take her in

my arms, not waiting for my soul to be rapt away, skipping many small things which emotion, being absent, could not step by step progressively suggest to my imagination. I held her in my arms and then touched her lips with mine. Her will swerved. She yielded, tasting her emotions. It proved a sombre hour for me. My lips were chill, not with that chill which causes a tremor of voluptuous delight when, having quitted them for an instant during the warmest caresses you come back to the lips of your mistress that have been drained of their blood, now coursing where a swift burning combustion has called it into being; not that chill, but the chill of the ugly mouth of an unbeliever, an uninspired chemist who analyses the abstract.

The escapade at Bouillon had taken me quite unawares and was addressed straight to my body. But now imagination, kindled by dreams of bliss, thoroughly impregnated by them, took possession of all the rooms in the House of Delight, leaving not a single cell wherein genuine desires could unfold themselves. My utter humiliation was novice-like. I did not think that I should continue in that state of physical impotence. What I felt was a clogging of thought, a jumble of respect for a powerful fancied Antoinette, fear and a lack of faith in my own virile force. This pervasive feeling bound my limbs. Then I recalled—it was the last straw—having read that, no matter how little a sensitive person anticipates what Stendhal calles a *fiasco*, it will come inevitably and in the degree in which the caresses grow more and more precise. I was, in one word, overcome by the witchcraft of what writers refer to as "those pleas-

ant intimacies," alluding to the quirks in man's body which superstition attributes to knots in the flesh membrane.

Not being a Cossack, one of Napoleon's generals, Murat or a barber, how should I have known that it could not be otherwise? This was the first time that, for me, love had sought the connivance of the body and love obstructed all the roads of communication to the cutting seed-cells where desires nest, desires like pointed flames, wayward and undisciplined.

An experienced woman would have shepherded my thoughts away from these grave problems of beauty, of fear and of adjustment. A girl of the streets would have had recourse to the remedy of a certain young mistress of Ovid. Antoinette, whom this very reference seems to smutch, even on this paper whereon I write, was as pure and as charmingly ignorant of this as a breath of perfume wafted into an open window in the morning—if it be true, indeed, that a young girl can be pure when love fills and consumes her.

Kneeling beside the fire she turned her sweet look on me, anticipating a night of peacefulness removed from this world, a night of infinite tenderness walled in by perfect security. She saw me overcome with emotion, paralyzed by love, and did not suspect the nature of my fears. I redeemed that night by offering up to the gods of the earth the bliss that is savored in the conflict of two desires. Once I had reconciled myself to this piece of good luck thrust upon me, the rigidity of my spirit loosened up, grew pliable and to Antoinette I then made

a free-gift of all the poetry that hitherto had welled up in my soul.

I was struck dumb. I ached to whisper a kind of prayer to the idol every man is able to celebrate during the first nights of his love. These songs make us wish at a riper age that society, having undergone a revolution, would properly esteem such "first nights." With something more of experience, the kinship between my body, my chaste caresses and my lofty songs of love having had time to be established and proven, I might have dipped into the sexual current. The heavenly hours, shadowless for Antoinette, passed. I lifted her onto the bed. I knelt down beside her. Now and then I withdrew and, coming back with slowness, I murmured that the splendor of her image had increased for me. I spoke in a muffled voice which added solemnity to the mystic rite of adoration. Making no sound, I cast more wood on the fire.

I unfastened her light garment. She was like a recumbent statue coming to life under the irresistible tide of admiration. Thus I came to discover her fine shoulders, thin at the top, polished like ivory, her broad chest and breasts as round as her shoulders, her slim waist, almost rectangular, attached to slender hips that broadened out, continuing by two short convexes to the thighs. Slightly depressed like a catalpa petal, her belly rose in the center, forming a distinct hillock, scarcely lower than the swelling of the mount of Venus. The small navel shone like a rosy petal in dark velvety shadow.

As I looked at her from a distance, my ecstasy was so

plain that Antoinette clasped her hands with delight. She made no other gesture. Her thighs were full halfway down, curving inward toward the pair of convexes flowing from her waist, and they curved inward once again toward the shadow of titmouse feathers, rather prominent, like that of a scarcely adolescent girl. Long I kissed her rosy feet and hands. Then I drew back about two feet from the bed, my heart full to bursting.

My prolonged scrutiny did not make her blush, although my eyes must have burned her body. My lips grazed all over her wonderful young body, and they too burned. The logs were consumed to red embers and I rebuilt the fire. When I turned round again, I noticed that she had drawn the sheets up over her. All that I was able to see now were her hands, clasped over the bedclothes, the little pointed fingers, and her angelic face that was diabolically beautiful, the eyes shut. I knelt at her side, and so we passed the night.

Behind her votive light, her hands joined together, in the niche, stood the Virgin who had not known a love like ours. Yet in her soul, perhaps, yawned an emptiness where there might have rolled just such a flood of adoration as had filled the hours of this night.

Like blue needles the dawn came through the slits in the shutters.

I felt aloof from everybody, including my usual self. Marthe stared at me as at a god. She had grown strangely thin and seemed, more than ever, to be wasted by an inner fire. She put no questions, but drank in everything that my words and, despite myself, my secretive attitude revealed to her. Urged on by a wild

despair, my mother insisted that I visit the cemetery every day.

When I returned to Antoinette at night, the memory of the reality, no longer mere dream, brought back my virility. I knelt before her as she sat in a low armchair with my arms twined about her. An ardent kiss drew a veil over our most intimate caresses. Presently the eternal flame that vouchsafes moments of splendor even to those who desire them not, engulfed us. Antoinette loved me then with the turbulence of blasphemy.

One evening, before shutting the window, she pointed out Cross Eyes who, with his back turned toward us, was climbing the ladder to the hayloft, followed by the Boy-with-the-Red-Handkerchief. The wooden shutters were open and the gleam of their lantern passed over us.

"If they turn round, they can see us," Antoinette said. "Their light wakes my father up. He can't fall asleep again when they start playing cards. His room hasn't any shutters like mine. There, they're about to close their shutters. Stand back. Don't stir," she admonished. I agreed with her that they would never find us out except through some unpardonable imprudence of our own. Then I added:

"It's your father that worries me!"

She reassured me by saying that the door leading to the adjoining bedroom was locked and that, if we kept our voices pitched low, he could hear nothing. She declared that we were well hidden from the vegetable gardeners; then, turning toward Muller's house where a fugitive light darted up, she inquired if it was true that we were friends.

B

"There must be many men like him," I answered, pitching my voice low as was our agreeable custom. "Yet there's a hideousness about him that I can't explain to myself. The mere sight of him makes me want to vomit. Once he touched me, and I shrivelled up like paper cast into a fire. I cannot tell you how much I loathe him. If he were to put his hand on me again, I'd stamp him out like a toad."

"You must leave Rupel, everything's so ugly here," she said with a wise air. Antoinette was one year older than I.

One morning upon taking leave of Antoinette in her rose-lighted room, where she lay under the praying Virgin in her niche, I discovered that my mother had been wildly calling me. She craved news of the state of Anne's grave. I found her listening, rooted in front of Marthe's door. She confessed to me that she often stole out in the night and stationed herself there, choking back her breath. There were times when I wished that my father would show signs of interest. We sensed his presence in the house merely as the threat of unknown dangers, although in general he kept aloof, going out only on professional duty and taking almost all his meals in his study. If I had sought to draw his attention to his wife's state of mind, he would have greeted my efforts with a smile of pity, and then dismissed me without trying so much as to understand what I wanted to tell him.

Within three or four days, I informed my mother, the marble to be placed on Anne's grave would be ready, and she must not worry. That seemed to comfort her.

She expressed a desire to be present when the stone-cutter put the tombstone in its place. I decided to visit the cemetery and on my way go into the stone-cutter's establishment.

I first went upstairs to change my clothes. In the next garden carpets were being beaten. The carpets hung from the peach tree over the small ladder. At the same instant I recognized the woman who was performing the work. I remembered that Marie had announced her abrupt departure from our house. She hasn't lost any time, I reflected.

Returning from the cemetery, I had another surprise that I should not think worth while setting down here, if it were not essential to an understanding of the end of this story. I was walking along the opposite side of the street, and as I drew near our house I could plainly make out the deep lintel in which the door of Muller's house was set. The framework was so deep that two men could easily hide there. Coming closer I beheld Trim stop there and drawing a penknife from his pocket he gave two sharp swift taps on the letter box. A quarter of a minute passed and Muller himself opened the door. He had evidently been waiting for Trim, or at least for this signal. "Well, he hasn't lost any time either," I mused, but this time with an icy sensation about my heart, a feeling akin to jealousy. But of whom was I jealous at that moment?

My father had left orders that I was to come to see him on my return. He rose when I entered, moved forward to meet me, then pushing me over the threshold said:

"I promised Muller that you'd drop in this morning and help him arrange his books. Go. You'll be doing me a favor." He shut the door again. I paused, waiting for Trim to go away. Then I went next door, but still prematurely for, while our former maid with a haughty air showed me into one room, I overheard Trim taking leave in another.

Quite amiable, at once brutal and unctuous, Muller showed me his books, his engravings and his pottery. We accomplished nothing, however; his books remained scattered all over the floor and the furniture. Near the fireplace he had placed two armchairs and a table. That was the one spot in the whole house where he had chosen to live. He rang for an aperitif, himself went to the door and took the tray from the hands of the maid.

"Never let a woman touch your books," he said. "She doesn't know how to handle 'em. I never let a woman come into a room where I am working," he added with a touch of irony. I did not wish to drink in the presence of the man. I was so little accustomed to practise self-restraint that I had to hold my tongue or spit in his face!

He showed me, slightly taken aback, Trim's terrible steel cane.

"I hear you're very strong," he said. "You can bend it like that, hein?" I kept silent. "He's given it to me. I just gave him the handsomest cane in my own collection. It's your turn to choose now." It isn't my turn at all to choose now, I meditated, quite incensed.

Then he showed me through the other rooms, chiefly that I might admire the furniture which was, I must

admit, very beautiful. I have never seen more costly or more curious furniture in all my life. In one of the rooms I spied, in the neighborhood of the andirons, the pair of red house slippers which had lain at the bottom of Muller's satchel. Catching my look, he smiled, and his smile was like that of a sophisticated woman whose heart had notwithstanding remained good and pure.

"Yes, there are the house slippers and here's a lovely flowered dressing gown which I also intend to give him. We'll pass many a charming evening with my books and my engravings, sipping those things which you appear to despise." Then, with the supreme audacity characteristic of gamblers, he added:

"We'll be as happy as lovers." He smiled, savoring in anticipation the delights of all the vices.

XIX

I ATTENDED to the placing of the tombstone on Anne's grave. When I came back to my mother she was on the verge of a collapse. She had already heard that the work was completed. The monomania had reached its climax when the obvious cause of her mental unrest was thus suddenly removed. But soon she lapsed into a frenzy whither her foolish fears had been leading her during the last few days. Then I put up my noonday signal for Antoinette: flowers on the windowsill similar to her own behind the open bars.

I lunched with my mother. We were served by Christine's nephew, a young waiter nineteen years old who, having vaguely learned the profession, exercised it vaguely in our house. The diversity of his duties kept him in a constant state of agitation, while it simply enervated us. He served my father's breakfast and attended, moreover, to all his needs, my own and nearly all of my mother's. My sister was waited on by Scarab who, now a grown-up young woman, still retained her adoration for Marthe. Mimi, loyal at heart, although having little to do with Scarab, had recommended her to us when she learned about the straits we were in owing to the brusque departure of our maid.

Six months after the death of my grandfather, contrary to what might be expected, we had neither coach-

man nor gardener. Vanity, called in such cases by the hypocritical and imbecile but polite pseudonym "family spirit," had prompted my father to use his influence with my mother that she yield up her right of inheritance in favor of her younger brother who "played the market." Therefore, instead of increasing at a time when our age as well as that of our parents, seemed to demand it, my father's revenue was cut down, because he had to come to the aid of his brother who had lost his capital. Thus it came about that when Marthe was too weak to walk on the boulevard, we had to rent a carriage if either my mother or I accompanied her, or a dismal landau if there happened to be three of us.

On this day Marthe refused to stir from the balcony. It was near the end of September, a brown and purple day; the ungathered roses on the balcony were reduced to tiny red pears. The virgin vines resembled Japanese branches of vermillioned lacquer, slowly shedding their leaves into the street where thrifty persons picked them up, casting a disapproving eye on our balcony. The servants complained of our disorder and negligence, a burden we of all people had no right to make them bear, since they were taxing themselves to the utmost already with a thousand honest tasks. Covered with foliage our house assumed a new grace of delicate sadness, mild and wistful, shed by the bronze sculpture of rust and by dead vermilion leaves that muffled it.

Languorously Marthe spoke to me in her stifled voice, slurring the consonants more and more, those demanding a quick contraction of the throat. She mentioned Madame Colen who had to open her small hands and

release the prey to the hue and cry of the whole town. Her husband, it was rumored, had locked her up. The handsome weak-spirited young man had been exiled to a college at the other end of the country. There he could exercise his charm afresh, build with sand, and paint in water-color his promises of happiness, so irreconcilable with his weakness and his lack of courage. Those two lovers had repeated the old buffoonery, right here in Rupel, only to torment Marthe's imagination. For scandal had not been necessary in this affair. The rational stratum of the town was sufficient unto itself; its real diversions lay in figuring out its capital, its net income, and in digging down into its pockets ruled only by the spirit of order, by the spirit of discipline common to the citizen who protects his equal merely to prevent intrigues from blossoming into scandal. If in the long run scandal contains a savory juice easily swallowed, it carries with it a certain danger, by no means negligible, for those—and among these the young—who are not soaked in the spirit of Rupel, whose great-grandfathers, for example, came from elsewhere.

From anxiety Marthe passed on to our love, which evoked in her as much curiosity as vivid enjoyment. She seemed to pop questions at me, as upon a gridiron, jerky questions interrupted by brutal silences. But as I did not generally reply to them except by a look, she remained silent and we carried on our conversation without speaking. I remember that her questions were strangely forthright, outcroppings of a monomania on love, and since she was slashed across the face by the devil, these questions eddied around obscure points of

physical love, as if she had need, first of all, of raising the blockade of these problems, to spy out those domains, just as we lead an intelligent horse along the bank of a stream he is to hurdle, so that he may acquaint himself with the size of the task we urge upon him, at first tenderly with the voice, then explicitly with the spur and the knee.

After the fashion of a man who has made a discovery of some practical importance to science, she began by confessing what happened during that walk with Mimi and Scarab in the wheat field two years before. She related that with no blush except the red spots that nowadays never left her cheeks. She spoke to me of this incident as you peruse a stupid and useless prologue, dull in itself, but which you must take in before you go on to the play, the comedy proper.

I guessed what was shaping itself behind those mildly formed words. She had been thinking a long time, she told me; she ached to know why and how she had been cursed and, above all, she ached to know her own body which had been so stricken and destroyed.

I was struck dumb because I could not confront her with an attitude of tenderness which would advantage me in dealing with the terrible disclosure of her half-guessed design. It all came about too suddenly, so that I had no time to plan a line of charity or of beauty which I could wisely follow. At that moment I felt the need of words I did not possess. After a long pause, swept in a whirlwind of broken thoughts, of our minds and our senses, Marthe said, dragging me into her room:

"Come."

Marthe stood still for an instant, like a child recovering its balance after having vehemently whirled round and round just to taste the ecstasy of acute dizziness.

"I've so many things to tell you before——" she began, "but I forget them. I'm not ashamed of what I'm about to say to you. I want you to see my . . . all the way up to this. It's a kind of sacred and mystic duty. You're my brother after all. You've suffered with me . . . differently perhaps, but still you've suffered with me," she added generously. "I have only you!" She fell silent. She recovered herself, and in doing so swerved from her original intention, as though she wanted to delay what her insane clinging energy alone could bring her to express.

"Do you think mother's losing her mind?" A cold chill suddenly opened a secret recess in my mind. "I know you think I haven't a very healthy mind myself." Presently she resumed:

"But you're wrong. I'm aware of the unheard-of immorality of what I'm about to ask you. We've been brought up without moral guidance. I, for one, have missed that," she said, pointing to the rosary hung under the image of the Virgin. "Incest, I know, is a crime condemned for ages among most modern races; no, among all the peoples of the earth. But that isn't just what I ——." She started afresh:

"I shall die young. But even that certainty doesn't console me. . . . I'm not unhinged. . . . You don't really believe I've gone mad?" I shook my head.

"Well, this much at least is unusual: never before

me was there a harelip"—for the first time in her life she articulated the words clearly—"who had such a gift for thinking, reasoning and imagining, as I have! Why haven't I, along with that, a sense of renunciation? Oh, if I were a stoic, do you think I'd go on living?"

For an instant I thought I had misjudged her or, changing her mind, she was about to beg me to kill her. A vertigo of confusion banned all thought. Her sorrow inundated my whole being, and the blood drummed in my ears. I supported myself with one hand on the bed toward which she had just led me. She sat down and out of her eyes shone an emotion that sprang from her great decision.

"Is it the same as that time with the little girls?"

Even to this day I am in two minds as to what I should have answered. At the time I was just as incapable of uttering, in a natural tone of voice, a casual word as I was of inventing a lie, a useless stratagem or a makeshift for the actuality.

"No," I answered.

There she sat on the bed, like one from whom all life had been drained, scrutinizing me with anguish as my chaotic thoughts traced themselves on my features. Although she knew that it had to do with an automatic phenomenon, she was ignorant of the process, or that it was a physical unfolding under the stress of an action, a task, often independent of our will-power or of thought over body. There I was, evidently without moral restraint, but in a torment of doubt, as I have said, my brain besotted with swift questions and mad

conjectures. If love would have sufficed, I should have been able to reply to Marthe.

Without affectation, let me say at this crucial point of my story that I despise the reader who thinks me immoral. Those who have accompanied me so far through the painful exhumation of our dead life, know that I have not been squeamish in my choice of terms, that I have been unhampered in the expression of my opinions and of my beliefs, either from a sense of morality or of modesty.

"Don't kiss me," Marthe murmured. Her body burned in a fever-pit, her eyes brimmed with tears which I dried with my lips. At last her will failed her, having undergone too great an ordeal. I noticed that she was about to swoon. Yet I could not even offer her a sham, a healing subterfuge, a splendid imposture, as I held her in my arms. The blood rushed through my head and made a whirring noise like wind cut by cordage. Her body started to writhe in such a way that I was beside myself with terror. Then a chill rose in her. I looked at her. She had fainted.

People will cast stones, either at my idiocy or at my immorality. I feel no guilt for not having been equal to playing the hypocrite with her, for having given her, on the contrary, a taste of the irrevocable actuality. Marthe was after all far too intelligent not to wring concrete conclusions from this, grounds for the most grievous torments.

I adjusted her clothes and called for help. My mother had a nervous collapse, while Christine and Scarab brought Marthe back to consciousness.

After that episode covered with tragic dust, Marthe inquired for me every day and I spent the greater part of every afternoon seated in her room. We cut down the frequency of our carriage rides. She had grown much thinner and the red-headed doctor treated her for anaemia, and it may be that my sister suffered from anaemia, but only as a consequence of an unknown malady. All medicaments were dispensed with and she was served the things which appealed to her.

Sometimes Muller came in the evening, but we never laid eyes on him. Out of sheer obstinacy my father went on seeing him. But when he expected Trim, the Baron never came to our house. On those special evenings the maid was dismissed at six o'clock, and she visited her mother at the other end of the town. The two friends were left free to celebrate the night. I shrank from all thought of the "dangerous mollusc," as my mother had called him, before she had fallen into her present mental disorder. Silently she sat in Marthe's room or in her own room, watching the autumn descend upon the trees along the boulevard or in the garden where at my suggestion we used to stroll after luncheon.

In the procession of our loves lies a hidden virtue which bestows on every new love the ardent sweetness of discovery. Just as a bird at once forgets where the air of a room is cut by the window-pane against which he hurls himself; as women say they forget the labor pains caused by bringing into the world a new monster; as the sot ceases to think of his worries and seems to have forgotten them—thus we are apt to forget the phases, particularly the unhappy phases in the growth

of love after love, how they passed through all the successive and identical zones of the soul before coming to ripeness, before the moment when we toppled headlong down. Our sense of honor, the practise of tethering to ourselves whatever we have once possessed, leads us on to plant a hundred obstacles in the course of that inevitable fall of ripe fruit. Yet whether it be through diabolical irony or merely to study fleetingly the two naive players who resist the fall, or whether it be to swell the ache of their pride by offering them a fresh delusion, love is at times arrested—an ephemeral pause at best—in the light of that ancient planet of love, the moon. Then it plunges again into the abyss where its early decay does not weaken the strength of its bonds. But the bitterness of that fall does not come home to the spirit until a new love has achieved a parallel stage, and so it is that until maturity, until the golden age which precedes the end, all our loves are beautiful shards of heaven, are beauty itself poised on truth.

Neither Antoinette nor I knew anything of this ebb and flow of the heart. We could not imagine a time when our love would fade. On the contrary, Antoinette appeared to ripen, her soul never pausing to refresh itself. She dropped no flower of the emotions; she continued to hold them all; her soul seemed to expand as these new emotions clamored for more space. No maturity was possible, it seemed, in that heart ready to contain the whole immensity of the world of love and passion. That is why Antoinette clung exaltedly to the eternity of this love, her first, and since it was her first (she could not successively take note of the phases which

she had forgotten) it wore the air of utter bliss; and it is this that made her consider lawful pleasures which, had she imagined a purer-souled love or others like it, would have struck her as being pornographic horrors, erotic dissections that sinned against the harmony she felt.

In me fibers of tenderness had heretofore only vibrated in keeping with rage, so that tenderness shrivelled at once under the breath of invectives. The stability of Antoinette's love was, for me, a thing of joy, and the release of her passion had grown soon to be a revelation that comes once to us all. The pangs eating at the hearts of the two women in our house hindered this passion and love from lifting my heart up and purifying my soul; yet I was often struck dumb with admiration by a word or a gesture or a promise of indissoluble fidelity, or with Antoinette's courage in self-denial.

One night I wept in a burst of rage because I was impotent to soar with her, the tide of pain being too heavy-laden for a trial flight. That night, throughout which Antoinette treated me like a little sick bird, is printed on my memory because, as I slipped into our garden that morning just before daybreak, a trivial thing occurred to me. It is a bit grotesque to connect what I saw (although it was the cause) with the horrible shock to my mind, and the wringing of my heart. In the early morning dusk I beheld the remnants of Marthe's dinner in the poultry-yard. It had been emptied there the evening before, Marthe stretching out her arm beyond the bed close to the window, as

B

during her first illness. When the hens appeared, they would gobble it up quickly.

The evidence was plain, and I fled into the fields, weighing the obscure pros and cons of Marthe's act, and whether it was right or wrong, just or unjust to keep silent. I could not reconcile the morals of the world with my highfalutin philosophical ideas, tainted with monstrous humors. And I could not make up my mind what part I ought to play. This is a fresh question which I put to the reader. But it is one that has always been with me.

I found myself seated beside a fowler from whom I bought a number of birds. His lime twigs were colored gray and blue in the oncoming daylight. He proceeded to explain the suspicious character of birds and what was the cause of it. The morning was chilly, sharp and stagnant, waiting for the sunrise. I listened with exaggerated attention to his information. I grasped or rather guessed at his meaning. He spoke *marollien*, a dialect part French, part Brabançon, part Flemish with some bits of Spanish. The fowler's owl had allured several poor creatures to the twig and he strode off to fetch them among the trees of the fir forest. Coming back, using ashes from the baker's oven, he cleaned off the glue that stuck to their wings.

A white streak on the horizon, then a crimson one, a purple one and at last the sun; it was all a matter of a few minutes. The pain I felt did not melt away with the daylight and the rising sun. My night of moral anguish, allayed by Antoinette's tenderness, had been but a prelude to the torture I felt at the moment I

entered our garden. Daylight brought no relief as I went back to town. It seemed futile to try to get rid of the hood of mortal dismay that pressed about my temples. The more I struggled, collecting my forces to solve the problem that had leapt up at me, the more obstinately it weighed on my heart, burrowing within me. It bared the native wildness of my soul which nursed the growth of my infamous wrath, a nameless, endless wrath, fattening malevolently as soon as it was unleashed.

Shadows of peasants, not yet quite visible, traversed the fields. Some time afterward the little dogcarts passed on their way to market. When at last day had broken, a carriage came toward me, and passed me: a black-clad figure with a face that was yellow: my mother on her way to the cemetery. Her eyes swept me on a level with my face, but she did not see me. She yearned to get there before the gate was opened. Not a gleam of pity lay at the bottom of my heart, which was not horizonless like Antoinette's; so crammed was it with wrath that nothing could penetrate it.

I shut myself up in my room on the pretext of illness, illness being the latch which kept out domestic life. At noon I clean forgot the flower signal. Someone came to tell me that my father wanted to see me in his study. This break in the silence brought me back to my senses, so that I reminded myself that I must put flowers on my windowsill, an answering signal to those Antoinette had already placed on hers. My father waited for me in vain.

XX

Two hours later Marthe despatched Scarab to me with a message. She felt well enough to go out that morning and so she had clandestinely sent a note to Antoinette, inviting her to take a walk in the afternoon. If Antoinette had put foot into our house, she would have provoked a scandal on a par with that of a profanation of the church by one of us vile Jews, so plainly, doubly cursed in our lives. We thought it best, therefore, to join Antoinette beyond the river, on this side of the bridge. Scarab was sent to find out if I would go with the young girls. If I decided to go, Gaspard, Christine's nephew, would order the landau—which we hated—instead of the coupé.

That afternoon my wrath achieved its meridian—at least until a new access, freshly motivated, superseded it. After a chill morning the afternoon turned out to be as lovely as an August day. We took the highway that led to the village of Ste. Anne. At a gentle trot we rode toward a sort of strategic point in the system of waters: canals, rivers, streams met there and crossed, swollen by each other's waters. A network of dams, footbridges, bridges surmounted by cog wheels, cranes, masts and signals suggested the presence of a magician, seated in a tower infallibly directing this obscure and seemingly ravelled mechanism. All around were green

meadows as far as the eye could reach. At the core of this industrious tangle of dams, the house of the magician, sat an ancient white-haired man of a modest appearance in spite of his subtle and tireless battle with water. A garden in bloom extended along the hornbeam arbor under which we sat down.

"Let's spend the whole afternoon here. Antoinette, would you like to? Pierre, let's tell the coachman to come back at. . . . "

"Five o'clock?" I suggested.

"Not later," Antoinette said, smiling her excuses.

"Good," Marthe cried. "Earlier if you wish. That's rather late, as it is."

"No," Antoinette said. "It's so sad to part. I can stay with you till then."

"Tell him to fetch the blankets before he comes back," Marthe added. I turned away. Marthe was exhausted after having articulated these few phrases. She said nothing in the carriage, although we did not fail to have a number of small adventures along the route. At first we met Trim. I alone recognized him. It was the last time I was to see him at Rupel. We also met nearly everybody whom we didn't care to have see us. A ceremony was in progress, a sort of inauguration of a new well-curb, belonging to one of the springs of miracle-working water. All the right sort of Rupel people passed us or met us on the way, seated in open carriages of every possible description. No doubt they were thinking: There go the accursed ones, and with the sacristan's daughter!

When I returned, the two young women were engaged

in low-voiced conversation, and they did not heed my approach. It was not, I believe, that the circle of their exchanges would not cheerfully welcome me or, talking about me, they did not wish the object of their praise to overhear. But I did not accost them. Passing in front of them, I went into the garden in full bloom.

It was a charming garden but, except for the large blue columbines, I saw only a mass of blinding color, painfully whipping up my brain to violence, to invective, to fury. Several seconds passed, or it may have been an hour before I discovered my strange and brutal act: the lovely cluster of cropped columbines lay trampled upon and the branches still bore, swaying, echoes of their frenzied resistance. No doubt that it was I who had massacred them. Idiot, cave-man, I called myself in a burst of despair, heedless that if a cave-idiot had torn the flowers, it would have been a calculated gesture, useful and practical, or at least religious. In my case, however, the massacre rose from a poisoning of the blood, seething with herbs of wrath and the foam of maddened wild beasts.

I sat down on a bench some distance from the slain flowers, my hands up to my face. I did not move for a long time. A clear enough idea came to me without my being able as yet to define it. Suddenly I rose to my feet. I had discovered what it was. I needed to be kept under guard. The danger was boundless. Imminent madness festered within me.

I ran toward the two young women, impatient to tell them what had come over me. Muller was seated next to Marthe. As grave as on the day when he stepped

down from the train, he played a gracious part loathesomely. He addressed himself principally to Marthe, gazing at Antoinette only by stealth, as though he were, craftily, taking her measure which he would check up later. As soon as I had sat down, he began praising my mother whom he had never seen and who had forbidden him to come to our house. She was unique, a heroic figure; but he was too thick-skinned to perceive that certain words, such as he used, aroused our suspicion. If I had asked him why my mother was unique and what made her heroic, his subtle wickedness would have been at a loss, since he could not say to our faces what he was getting at.

Marthe fixed on him her unconsciously pleading eyes. He was the last person in the world to turn over artfully such sheaves of envenomed sarcasm. Antoinette and I were rigid with cold fear every time that he doled out, with a grotesque pose of soberness, a new phrase that was filigreed with pure villainy. He alone talked. It would have been advisable to start a longish tale, just to shut him up. He talked to Marthe as though he were talking about her with an utter stranger. His pity, guarded and discreet, was like that of an incorrigible optimist who harangues a man just freed from the hell of some prison: a rosary of poppycock. In all that he said there was less villainy and cowardice than his ill-controlled grossness would seem to indicate. What was vile in the circumstance was that such a man should be allowed to speak to Marthe, and that he should take it upon himself to shower sympathy upon her. But his vileness stopped, as if by a miracle, this side of such

bent expressions or innuendo as would have earned him, in spite of the presence of Antoinette and Marthe, a sound beating.

Marthe rose to her feet. She wanted to meet the carriage. Then—that man who had, inferentially, been chased out of our house presumed to offer Marthe his arm. I put my hand on his throat. He staggered back. But it was I who shook all over.

We went along a path from which we had a view of the highway and the carriage. Several minutes passed which I shall never forget as long as I live. He walked beside Marthe. I followed with Antoinette, so close on his heels that I almost touched him. Shortly afterward, while stepping into the carriage, Marthe began to feel ill. With the impudent air of a papa instructing a child in politeness, Muller started to get in after us. I slammed the door. He was so despicable, he laughed:

"This, when I came especially to chat with my friends! I was delighted at this opportunity, when Trim told me you were here." I ordered the coachman to drive on, while I looked about for some missile to fling at the head of that brutish unleashed animal. Not thinking it worth while to hide its infamous thirst for revenge, it yelled at us:

"Come, all of you, and see my collection!"

I don't know whether Marthe heard him. Her eyes were shut, her face was greenish, the blood having been drained away from under the skin. We covered her with blankets, hoping in that way to bring the blood back. Never had my sister suffered a greater insult, at the hands of a man who had an even greater desire to do

evil to all of us. The invectives hurled at me in Rupel made a tryst, it seemed, in the mind of that execrable scoundrel, and there brewed the essence of their venom to be poured, with the sham gesture of an offering, on the heart of that dying young girl.

The wind had risen, driving immense black clouds before it, spattering us with drops of rain. The horses sped along. We quickly entered the town, mantled in that damp somberness which heralds a torrential downpour accompanied by lightning. Then, although no reason for doing so existed, but simply to express a thought which had grown barren beside the drama that had just shaken us, Antoinette excused herself.

"I didn't tell you why I've got to go home. My father's returning from Mons, where he went to attend my aunt's funeral."

"Your aunt?" I murmured, unthinkingly.

"Yes, the elder one."

XXI

I took the last meal on that cruel day alone, stung into a fury not hard to visualize, if I haven't quite failed in setting forth the character of Pierre. On getting up from the table, Gaspard, for the second time that day, mentioned that my father wanted to see me. Then, suddenly, my father rose up in front of me, close to the dining-room door, having decided to come down himself. He was on the verge of reprimanding me in lugubrious fashion. I took the letter from his hand and while I appeared to be deciphering the address, he kept on gazing at me. Then he wheeled round and strode away, shrugging his shoulders. It took me several seconds to make out the address written on the thick envelope. I put it mechanically into my pocket, without making a mental reference that Muller, to whom it was addressed, and the man who had so grossly insulted us, were one and the same person. I merely promised myself to drop the envelope into the letter-box of the "dangerous mollusc."

Overcome with an aversion for solitude that evening, which my father had but intensified by showing himself to be not my enemy, but one who was contemptuous of me, I did not deliver the letter immediately. Instead, I went upstairs to see my sister. Dressed, she lay on her bed, her face as wan as it had been in the carriage. She

was like one possessed, and her groans were like the rattle that precedes the terrifying cry of the epileptic. My mother, her eyes fixed straight ahead of her, unseeing, was seated near the bed. She had let a letter slide to the floor.

"Marthe," I murmured quite low. She opened her eyelids. They were dry, but in the shadow of the lamp the cornea burned like the eye of an ostrich. After gazing at me, she gave my mother a look that said she was concerned with this world only conditionally, then with her hand she made a weary gesture indicating the letter. I picked it up and read it. It was the letter of a drunken Jehu: Muller accused me and excused himself, and in doing so had briefly composed a masterpiece of outrageous knavery. So unheard-of was the protestation of his sincere devotion that it would have occupied a novelist days on end to weave it. The woof betrayed a number of asperities which grew out of the scented flowers of style, only to be again quickly dissimulated. This man possessed a sort of genius for perfidy, marred by nothing but greed; what he lacked was the tact needed for the final polish and the artist's revelation of the psychology of others.

In a word, his protestations of the afternoon were renewed: he was of course too old to marry Marthe, but his self-abnegation, his devotion would be a rare thing on this earth of ours.

"Filth like this must be exterminated" I cried in a low voice. The two women did not stir. The stillness was like the ceaseless rumbling of a storm. If I stayed on, my firm intent would crumble to pieces. Then, as though

in obedience to a long-standing decree which had mounted to the surface of my consciousness, I wandered toward the door. But I did not know that this urge would also steer me to my neighbor's house. Before opening our own door, I drew an envelope out of the box, spied my name on it and hastily perused the note, but my mind scarcely took in its meaning. "Pierre, you must go away tomorrow. You told me that your mother would help you. Go away. Send me your address. A " I slipped this note into my pocket. But in doing so my fingers closed round the other envelope, and I thought of my father's request, made before I had gone upstairs to my sister's room, to go at once and put the letter in our neighbor's box.

When I opened the door, a salvo of raindrops splashed in my face. I dodged for shelter under the deep vault of Muller's doorway. As I watched the downpour so physically real, I felt that this day of madness had been spent in a suffocation of the soul, an obscuration of the spirit, in a strange suspension of reason. But the freshness of the sheeted water breaking at my feet brought me no poise of spirit, as sometimes dwelt within my wild nature, untamed and lacking the ripe counsel that is due to discipline, a discipline of memory which reminds us that other horrors, once as real, are now altogether forgotten. Like many animals, my memory was composed of sensation, of stimuli to the senses. That is why, if it has been a trial to recollect the unforeseen events of that day, this does not mean that my tortured nerves were not in a state of unhealthy overexcitation. Similarly, if I failed to recall how odious

Muller had grown to me, caressing my knees in the inn, monopolizing Trim whom I had suddenly come to love, taking him away from me, and other still more intimate facts, which, less enduring among my nerve stimuli, were in consequence more remote: his behavior at the dam, at the carriage door and finally the drunken Jehu letter—all this does not mean that my body was not embittered, leaving no room for a single harmonious thought, as a butcher draws off the lungs, the heart and the entrails of an animal, gradually filling the cavity with water as the carcass is emptied.

Unawares I must have given notice of my presence to an Apache-like ear eavesdropping within the house, for without a creak the door opened.

"Oh, I knew you'd come. But, upon my word, I didn't expect you so soon. Now that's very nice of you," Muller exclaimed, closing the door and leading the way toward his room. I followed him.

"Ah, I know it! You're just a bit discourteous—a bit, just the least little bit. You live too much alone, too much aloof from young people your own age. Your father's told me so," he finished, insinuating that both he and my father laughed at my whimsies and held me responsible for my inability to get along with young people.

"Where's the rest?" he stupidly inquired; for he must have been stupid to have heaved such a big stone on the bulky shoulders of an indignant lad. But if he was far too brutish to exercise tact, to make allowances for the give-and-take of another's mind, his visitor was too full of wormwood to take note of this new bit

of bravado. There I was, checking my rage, wondering oddly what a man of thirty would have done in my place.

He stared at me in silence. I believe that, ignorant as he was of psychical reactions, the thought occurred to him that I was a coward. How or why I don't know, but I sat down in the armchair to the right of the hearth, my back to the glass door giving on the garden. Next to this table, at my left, was a smaller one. The big table was covered with books, bottles of wine, liqueur flagons and coffee things. On the table near me lay the flowered dressing gown Muller had offered Trim and, beside it, the steel cane which the latter had yielded up for some lovely object in Muller's collection. Under the table were the famous red house-slippers. I was drunk. My face, no doubt, was swollen. I blinked my eyelids several times. Noting my calmness, Muller came toward me and said:

"Come, let's be friends!" But he did not have time to finish. The moment he touched my shoulder I sprang up and thrust him toward the armchair which he overturned. Twenty words, crammed in my throat, issued in a formless cry. Madness seemed to lift me up from the ground.

Through the crimson waves beating in front of my eyes, I beheld Muller smiling and, despite his terror, he uttered the one triumphant rebuff:

"Ah, I know you've got friends more appetizing than I am. But don't fool yourself. Do you think you're the only one? Look," he said, dashing aside the curtain. Outside, the downpour of rain. "By means of that

ladder I can . . . and who'll deny it? . . . I can be warmly received by your little whore. . . . "

I grabbed Trim's cane in my left hand and with all my cumulative anger I struck him across the right temple, for he had dodged the blow aimed at his shoulder. The end of the cane shattered the window-panes behind his head and while the splinters of glass crashed about, Muller crumpled up, sinking down like an empty cloak.

The man who had decided to put the letter in the box listened intently to the crash of glass about him; the other man, inside of me, incredibly cool, rejoiced in the snapping of the tension. Presumably the reader has never killed a man; this being so, I cannot make him feel with the aid of mere words the lofty solace of that relaxation. I had not wept for a long time. Now, for several minutes, I shed tears of joy. I found myself still alive beside the dead man, for I knew he was dead. The greatest balm during my relaxation arose from the fact that I was convinced he was dead.

In the white stillness that ensued, awoke the precipitate sound of the rain, ticking away like an eternal function and, at regular intervals, an overflowing gutter-pipe spat out fiercely. In the midst of these noises two small dry knocks sounded in the vestibule. I rose and, as though during the past half hour I had lost all sense of time and had duly performed the errand which I set myself when my father gave me the letter, I moved toward the door. The two small knocks were repeated. I dropped the letter in the box, empty of all

emotion as I fulfilled this strange posthumous act. Then I heard Trim's voice.

"Open the door, Maurice. It's raining. Otherwise I'll have to go away." Before me surged the vision of Trim, Trim taking the train at the station never again to return, Trim as he appeared when he announced that he was going to leave at the end of the month, and that he was expecting money any day. My hand was on the door. I was about to open it. . . .

When I came back into the room, the scene assailed me as if I had been present as a mere onlooker, save that, when I recalled the last word he had uttered, I felt the selfsame iron collar garotte my throat; and an external force, quite outside of myself, hurled me toward my victim. I stood beside the broken pane. A puff of fresh air and a spatter of raindrops brushed across my face.

Which had the right to determine my movements? The fact that I had discovered my love atop of the ladder which I myself had balanced against the wall, or the fact that this ladder had been used as a relentless assertion of death. It occurred to me, darkly, that I did not have the right to escape by a way soiled through ugly associations. It also occurred to me, darkly, that to make use of the ladder to get away was to choose the way of beauty and truth.

The shadow of fear fled and the whimsical thought flashed into my mind that if I told Trim what I had just done, his first reflection would have been that I had revenged myself; and this suspicion—precisely how unjust it was I could not say—seemed to me, who was at

a loss as to how I might clear myself of such a libel, harsher than a verdict of manslaughter.

Pursuing a line of conduct derived from newspaper-reading, "the murderer bent over his victim to assure himself," and so on. The body was cold. I did not look at his face. That would, perhaps, have been a trifle too much for a young fellow not yet twenty.

The nervous fit that made me quake as I crossed the garden and mounted the ladder had nothing to do with fear. I merely beheld the reality under whose light others were going to judge this crime, and this reality haunted me with a series of pictures, at the start rather blurred, and then sharpened by the stark inertia of convention. I did not foresee to what extent my life would be different for having killed a man. Yet I had a quick perception that I must seek out other modes of thinking, that I must enter a new circle of hell, without, thus far, distinguishing any of its details.

In answer to my first tap, Antoinette opened her window noiselessly. She trembled as she relit the lamp. That done, turning toward me she slid to her knees and cried:

"My God, Pierre!"

A strange vertigo came over me. When I recovered she removed my damp coat and wrapped a coverlet around me. I sat before the flame in the grate without uttering a word, but she had divined everything except the subsidiary details. Falling on her knees in front of the Virgin and her votive light, her hands clasped together, she moved her head in my direction and questioned me, as if she wished directly to communicate my

replies, together with her ardent prayers, to Our Lady of Grace.

"Too late—it's done?" I replied with a nod. "That man? When did you do it?" I nodded for the third time, accompanying my gesture with an impatient toss of the chin that meant: "Just now!" She did not ask me why I had done it.

On Antoinette's face despair was quickly superseded by traces of the dynamic energy I so much admired. She stood there unmoving. To her I was only an accessory now who would once more become dear to her, once the comedy she was about to play was over. Her rapt face, heedless of me then and for some minutes afterward, gave color to the way in which I have just described her expression.

She went up to the window, her head bowed in thought; the next minute she said:

"How long ago—twenty minutes?" I nodded. I had tried to say "yes" aloud, but my throat was hard and dry, gripped by taut muscles, as though it had been with a terrible cry that I had done my killing, not with muscles of flesh stung into fury. Following my reply, wavering a moment, she pushed open the large window in spite of the rain. My astonishment turned to panic when, leaving the window open, she came back and knelt beside me in the circle of glow around the lamp.

"Antoinette, we'll be seen!" I cried at last. She fixed her gaze on me as though she meant to feel the pulse of my sanity, as though she feared for my mind, probing to find out if I could take in a simple explanation

or if, for the time being, she must lie to me. She declared that nobody could see us. To calm me she returned to the window and partially closed one of the shutters. Just then, through the lessening monotone of the rain, I heard voices in the vegetable garden. A second later, the scraping of feet on the ladder. I was about to rush toward the window. Antoinette threw herself upon me, pinioning me with both her arms to prevent me from closing it. When I had freed myself at last, directly across from us, Cross Eyes and Red Handkerchief, were watching us with a surprise that had not yet blossomed into malice. Standing in the glimmer of their lantern, they enlarged on the importance of their discovery.

My courage exploded. I stood there inert, convinced that the situation could not be worse. Things were made worse, however, assuming dimensions Antoinette had not anticipated. The lantern gleam, darting longer than usual into the sacristan's room, awoke the suspicion of the sacristan, who was tossing sleeplessly, having returned from Mons in a high state of "excitement." He rose and padded to his window whence he made out the two lads watching his daughter's window. He leaned out, saw the light and the open bars and shouted to Cross Eyes:

"What's the matter? Is anything wrong?" The noise of the window upstairs being pushed open made me fall back, but I paused to catch Cross Eyes' reply.

"Wrong? Well, that depends. . . . " That is as far as he got before he spied the admonitory finger I had

placed to my lips. Red Handkerchief disappeared inside the hayloft, but not before he had flung out:

"'Tisn't any business of ours."

The sacristan had not heard the second reply. He rushed out of his own room and got as far as the empty one adjoining Antoinette's just as she was opening the door.

"What's this?" he shouted, bursting into her room. I was half over the window. He hurled an epithet at me: only one, but as telling as his many years of repression could make it. I caught Antoinette's last desperate words, futile and irrelevant, into which she put all her breath, her last atom of courage:

"Why, papa! Aren't you asleep yet? It must be nine o'clock!"

Her voice died away. She had come to the end of her strength.

Antoinette had acted with wonderful foresight when she casually told her father the time, and I too was unconsciously and unpremeditatedly cool-headed. For instead of going back to our slumbering house, I climbed the ladder leading to Cross Eyes' loft. I was coldly received. It did not occur to me to urge them to keep silent. I merely told them that I could not get in until the servants had unlocked the door in the morning. Frankly I could summon up no initiative of my own. I had lost control over every fibre of my being. I lay down on the straw in the loft. My safety, I fancied, depended on pretending that I had fallen asleep. They said nothing, exchanging glances from time to time, then they put the deck of cards, which they had

picked up, back on the chair and blew out the light. The clock of Ste. Clotilde struck the hour. As the chimes rang out, I thought of Antoinette's broken voice and what she had said. At the final peal, mechanically I observed: "Nine o'clock."

"It's earlier than usual for us!" Red Handkerchief remarked.

Before daybreak I rose. Cross Eyes from his prostrate position blinked up at me. I moved over to where he lay with the intent of imploring him not to give me away, and to bind the other lad to keep his mouth shut too.

"How about the old man? Well, I guess he'll keep mum," Cross Eyes whispered almost inaudibly.

XXII

I had been lying prone on my bed for several minutes when my mother came in. She had been looking for me all night. Marthe, she faltered out, was dying. As I got up to go with her, she caught sight of my face as it emerged from the shadow and cried:

"Pierre! What's the matter? Pierre, what have you done?" She put her arms around me while I walked with her to the door.

"She's asleep now. . . . Pierre!" she cried again. I sat down. She knelt beside me, looking up at me, trying to read the expression on my face, trying to wrest from my features what had happened or what I had done. Christine knocked. I asked her to come in. Struck dumb, she filled the doorway. Obviously, she had expected to find me alone. I reassured her.

She said that while on her way downstairs she overheard the Boy-with-the-Red-Handkerchief, who had come to deliver the milk, relating something to Scarab. Christine hushed him up and gave him a good scolding for his malicious tongue-wagging. With the arrogance of the lower classes, of the sober citizen who has behind him the whole body of law, he asserted his rights against outlawry, oblivious that all our wretched institutions, legal nowadays, are the outcome of ancient rebellions. Checking her anger, Christine begged him to hold his

tongue, but he said the whole town had got wind of it by now.

"That I spent the night in Antoinette's room?" I queried, that part of the night being most open to inspection.

"Yes, and before he went to bed her father found you there. What's to be done?" Christine asked, as if a thousand mouths could be hushed from gossiping idly about somebody's ill-luck, about something their chatter could neither prove nor disprove. The warning stir that announces the hubbub, the swarm of young parasites that batten on the growing scandal, could not be thrust back. It was just as if a street singer with a violin, accompanied by a crony with a long stick, pointed out the tale of our love on a painted canvas subdivided into squares whereon the successive stages of our love were portrayed, stopping in front of every door in town, in all the public squares. At that period in such a manner the history of a great crime was brought home to the people: a wailing voice accompanied by crude pictures. But our love boasted a hundred singers: peasants coming to town, domestics returning with their early morning purchases, street sweepers slowly advancing with their brooms and the story—all passed it along like a sweetmeat, an agreeable morning tidbit, to the backstairs that had not yet heard it. Thus from the public squares, like a young dog, the tidings ran unleashed for a morning run toward the insides of the houses. If an organ were not needed to offset the calumnies and chicanery of political parties, newspapers in a small town would be a drug on the market. More-

over, how can they publish on a morning like this what is spoken in the master's rooms? Or what has been absorbed, by evening, into the career of the sordid day by members of the so-called Circle, most of whom are decrepit soldiers and travelling salesmen.

My mother breathed a sigh of relief. "If that is all!" she thought; and in her heart she felt a faint stirring of joy such as she had not known for a long time. Satisfied that my mother's distress had gone from her, Christine took leave of us with the remark that Antoinette's father kept to his bed. Timidity forbade me to say what I thought, namely that Antoinette's father was ill owing to the night he had spent in Mons. The murder troubled my memory very little, having brought about only a clinging exhaustion which I could not shake off, and physical nausea.

In my present state, the indisposition of the sacristan had no interest for me. Even Marthe, an old inveterate cause of worry, scarcely rasped my nerves now. Antoinette had done more than merely sacrifice herself to me (so it appeared to my unstrung mind), she had become my accomplice. As I came to myself by degrees, by an odd twist, this sense of Antoinette's guilt grew. An evil and faulty association of ideas in my unhinged brain was no doubt responsible for this fixation, my mental life having been wrenched apart and shaken into some new nexus.

After Christine had left, my mother drew up to kiss me, heartened by that little thrill of evanescent pleasure. Suddenly she repeated her cry of distress: "Pierre. . . . Pierre!" I made a gesture which said

"later." The brief truce was over; she dragged herself away from me and every nook and cranny in the house, every refuge in the world, gaped with sinister shadows for her. She dropped into Marthe's room to see if she was sleeping, and went downstairs to her own boudoir.

I found her in her boudoir after she had stumbled sombrely through the house. An obscure urge was beginning to shape within me. A thought rose up and knocked for entrance to my reason; I must act. But how? The boudoir window was half open. The murmur of a crowd, quite large now, surged outside on the sidewalk. My mother questioned me with a glance to see if the moment for speaking had arrived. Then she resigned herself. She was deaf to the chatter and clamor in the street. But I could not help listening.

I shall not now tell all I heard from my place of concealment. First I gathered that Marie, our former maid, had been arrested. Then we are both lost, I thought, associating myself always with Antoinette.

"Marie's given a hole-proof alibi," a policeman vouchsafed. He was on his way home from the police station. His natural pompousness was inflated still more by his knowledge of the legal details of the crime.

"Marie was the first to go into the room this morning," observed a woman, the next door baker's wife. The policeman did not offer a reply to this.

The doctor passed in front of the landlord's house, having been invited to come by the latter. The doctor stopped his carriage and it was at once surrounded by a cordon of awed silence. Only fragments of sentences came to us: He had, he insisted, done his duty as a

coroner: Muller's death had occurred the night before, not earlier than ten o'clock in the evening and not after one o'clock in the morning.

My mother murmured softly: "Then it couldn't have been Marie!" This deduction did not ruffle me. No idea of how to escape, no feasible plan occurred to me, and I had not the slightest intention of fleeing. Those people milling in front of the house next door were, I felt, just as hostile to me as they had been during the religious procession. But they did not loom up as more hostile. Perhaps, in the depths of my heart, a dummy of conscience insisted that they were far less hostile than they had a right to be. I had no inkling that my liberty would be purchased at the price of Antoinette's "honor," and I made none of the reflections which it is easy, now, for you, the reader, to make as well as for me, the murderer. Impatient with the doctor's verdict, the baker's wife asked:

"Then why don't they free Marie? Why don't they?" Nobody answered. Mimi raised her voice and recounted for the tenth time what she had told the police commissioner when he cross-examined her for the first time that morning.

"You know, people come in for kerosene the first thing in the morning. Being without any in stock last night, I shut my shop and ran myself to order some. They said they'd deliver in one hour and came punctually. The cart stopped in front of my house at exactly half past nine. I had just looked at the clock. It was pouring something terrible. I helped the man to carry in the cans. Just then we saw that very handsome vaga-

bond who visits at the Baron's house every evening." No doubt everybody nodded in confirmation of that, for there was a short silence.

"Trim," somebody ventured.

"That's the one," Mimi volunteered. "He seemed to be in a hurry. He ran toward the door and rang the bell."

"But he didn't ring," I said, barely articulating the words. My mother was seized by a cold tremor that leapt to the surface as she envisaged the horror of our future life, due to my innate violence of nature. She grew faint. She kept her eyes away from me now. The possibility of flight did not occur to her either. Mimi brought out:

"He went in and stayed till the eleven o'clock train. People say he took that train. By then it had stopped raining."

"They've found shirts marked S. R. which didn't belong to. . . " a woman's voice said. Once more a brief silence fell. Angry at having been interrupted, Mimi offered, this time, not a piece of evidence but the gleaning of her own observation:

"Yes, and on the commissioner's table, along with those shirts and other things I couldn't make out, I saw the cane—you know the one—that belonged to the good-looking fellow." This fact was confirmed by the kerosene merchant who had already been called upon to verify Mimi's testimony. He had come back to the thrilling place where he had been exactly one hour before the crime was committed.

"Why don't they let Marie go then?" the baker's

wife persisted. I imagined her look of scorn for all those poor ignorant people.

"Maybe she's an accomplice," somebody suggested.

"Maybe he was dead before Trim came," said another who had not, plainly, heard the coroner's verdict.

"I can tell you why," Mimi put in. "Didn't you hear it? I've already told it twenty times! Yesterday the postman, Ado, accompanied by another colleague who'd been retired from service at Rupel, rang the bell because he had a package to deliver. It was the gentleman himself who came to the door and took the package and said, 'Thank you,' like that, very nicely. It was the last delivery of the day. It was just nine o'clock, they said. We saw Trim go in at half past nine, exactly. Now isn't that right?" Mimi asked. The kerosene merchant said "Yes." They had found the package. It was a book with illustrations of plates and pottery.

I listened only half-attentively, unconcerned with the way in which what I heard was going to affect my position. At that moment I was on tiptoe to get word to Antoinette. Not that I thought it would do any good, but because, with the flooding back of reason, my heart sprang awake. Through the obscure working of my mind a conclusion was forced on me. Trim entered the house at half past nine; before nine o'clock I was, according to the gossip of the whole town, in Antoinette's room, where her father caught me. Perhaps the conclusion was already in my mind, unknown to myself, when I suddenly had an impulse to see Antoinette. I don't know whether it was something she had done or whether the conclusion alone was responsible for the

awakening of this desire. One instant after that second rung had been reached by my reasoning, I wondered: Would Trim appear suddenly or would he pass out of sight, leaving not a single trace behind? That the guilt would weigh on Trim, far away in America, or on Trim dead, appeared to me a question of pedantic ethics, worthy to furnish forth a neat theme for Corneille or a grandiloquent one for Sophocles.

In the door half ajar Christine stood holding out a letter. Without stirring I reached out my hand and she came in, in spite of my mother's presence. Surveying me, my mother leaned back in her armchair. It was a note from Antoinette delivered by Scarab who was forthwith packed off to church by Christine, so upset was she over the outbreak of the scandal. The note said: "Courage, Pierre! And do not forsake me!" In the same envelope there was another note torn into small scraps. I recognized it at once. It was the one I had put into Muller's box. The box was empty now. Antoinette, no doubt, believed that all she could gather or hear would be of genuine use to me, would guide my conduct.

My mother made a movement. I looked at her and she, on her part, questioned me with a glance.

"It's nothing," I said, meaning the letter. Then, indicating the crowd outside which continued its discussion:

"But that?"

"No!" I said.

Just then my father who had been searching for

me opened the door and called me. I could not rise to my feet.

"Come," he said, "I must have a talk with the prosecutor about this serious business of the letter you delivered yesterday," he added, despite his intention to conceal the existence of the letter from my mother.

"But Raymond," my mother cried, "wait until you're called. Why do you want to mix in this affair if it's not necessary?"

I got up bent on confessing to my father that I had retrieved the envelope. I asked him to wait for me. My mother precipitated herself toward me, threw her arms about me and wept. Her sobs became so loud that my father, either because he feared to attract the attention of the people in the street, or because he could not or would not divulge the contents of that letter; or because he was, notwithstanding his short-sightedness, struck with our emotion, left the room saying:

"Oh, all right. Why all this ridiculous fuss over a crime that hasn't anything at all to do with us?"

My mother came with me into my room. I was quite oblivious of everything. The power to think had vanished, stifled under a crushing fatigue: My head was so heavy that when I touched the pillow I gave a little cry. A bit later I fell sound asleep.

In the course of the day I woke up. My first thought was of Antoinette, then of Marthe. In the grip of an indescribable nightmare, my mother wandered from Marthe's room to mine. My thoughts persisted in a state of confusion and delirium. I do not know how many days elapsed before I learned that our doctor

had given up Marthe and that we were expecting a doctor from Bouillon; that Antoinette was being kept under lock and key by her father and that legal opinion was no longer at variance, and that Trim had been traced as far as Bouillon; that Marie was still being held in custody because she confessed to having stolen, in her fright, an envelope addressed to Muller which contained two thousand francs and nothing else, and that she had dropped the envelope into one of the confessional boxes in the church of Ste. Clotilde.

But I was first to get news of Trim. It must have been six days after the evening which had earned a lifelong bad name for me that I received two letters. One was from Trim asking me to forward to Verona a certificate attesting that he had served in the Italian army, but not in that of his own country. I was to find this document, which he needed most urgently, in one of his books which he had lent me, and which he hadn't been able to call for because the money he was expecting had arrived suddenly under his real name of L. . . . He thanked me. He said, moreover, that, outside a handful of friends, I was the only person who was familiar with his name. He signed himself S. Riccardo. In all haste I sent him the certificate, as if by getting it out of town I was destroying the last bit of tell-tale evidence, I was cutting away the last cruel arm that fettered me. Only once again did I lay eyes on him. More than ten years later, at Verona, I recognized him under the cypresses of the Giusti Gardens. I accosted him, but he greeted me in such a way that I was not encouraged to cultivate him further.

"No," he said. "My name is Stefano Riccardo." Seeing that I did not doubt that Trim and Riccardo were the same person, he went on:

"Of course there are people who adopt several names in the course of a lifetime. But that doesn't prevent them from being polite. And it is for others to show themselves equally civil by remembering only the name which they claim is their real one." This affront caused me to turn away from him, from the man who was ignorant that one of the ephemeral personages he had been—and who had, in fact, written me from Verona—had, according to the police, murdered a certain German baron.

The other letter was from Antoinette who implored me to save myself by flight if the situation changed for the worse. She did not despair, she said, ardently beseeching me not to abandon her. Her aunt had received two genteelly-phrased anonymous letters, and she had in turn written Antoinette's father in a style that was half religious and half passionate, urging him meanwhile to pack his daughter off to Mons. She wrote Antoinette to the effect that she was ready to welcome her with the tenderness of a mother toward a daughter. Antoinette put all this into letters which she sent me from Mons, whither she had fled, persuaded that her sacrifice had saved me.

With fierce joy, at bottom immoral, I replied that it was almost certain that T. the putative author of . . . would never be tracked down and that I would come to Mons as soon as I felt free to leave Marthe and

my mother of whom, answering her request, I would later send news.

My mother was overjoyed to see me cured of my delirium and told me that she had been thinking of the advisability of my leaving; in fact she considered it quite necessary. Everything had been prepared for it. My father had given his consent. Ten days later, if Marthe's condition improved—for in spite of our certainty that she would soon die we still gave utterance to frail words of hope—I would take a train for Paris armed with letters to some of my father's old school chums, and one for a childhood friend from Bouillon, also there. Since he had given his permission, I left for Paris, but my mind beat its head against the walls of a prison more terrible than any made by human hands—not the prison of remorse, but of doubt regarding the right to kill, not the right to kill others, but the right to kill oneself: a thought which undoubtedly slipped into my mind by way of two *Meas;* one I was ignorant of, and the other operated with a cold decisiveness, giving me not a second's truce. This problem, akin to some unbearable torment, a jagged refrain in the night that ends by making you spring up with rage, had taken shape within me less unconsciously than I had supposed.

What added to this feeling, more than the poignant realization that I was to go on living without Antoinette, more than the thought of the ease with which I had killed the "dangerous mollusc," was the decision Marthe had taken, unknown to all of us and which nothing could alter. Thus betwixt the death I had brought

about, which a trifle, an inanimate chance object or an extremely melodramatic check would have prevented—thus showing the volatile and frivolous nature of reality—betwixt this death and Marthe's, which she had by a quick resolve inflicted on her miserable body (no force in the world was able to thwart her progress toward extinction now) I found myself suddenly bewildered by these shifting values. My age, my meagre intellectual development, my utter ignorance of the whole arsenal of modern psychology and the average of intelligence with which I was endowed, plunged me into a state of mind where a throng of questions overwhelmed me, questions whose place in ethics I have not even today fixed, and to which I can invent no answers.

Submerged by these questions, by the need of safety, by my mother's condition (she had forgiven me the crime "ten years before" it was committed), by the dread of remorse such as you read about in books, I arrived at Mons. I did not get off the train as I had meant to do when I bought a stop-over ticket for Paris. From Paris I wrote Antoinette *everything*, that is, all that I had performed with my own poor truculent hands, all that had since transpired in my mind, oddly disavowed now by a certain exaltation due to brooding on it. I promised her (without knowing if that was what she really wanted from me) not to abandon her. I promised her, also, not to regret what was past lest that attitude grow into remorse. The temptation of remorse, as it manifests itself among educated criminals or those who profess religion, is hard to resist, and I should not, I said, be able to resist it. My love

for her would continue unaltered or deeper, but she must not expect me to come to her except with the crime unexpiated, knowing nothing of repentance. If I ever felt remorse, I should esteem it a kind of death and she never would see me again. "Meanwhile wait for me two years. We will achieve peace of soul. Together we will redeem my soul by writing everything to each other."

When my mother said that my departure was all arranged for, I broke in with swift-gathering bitterness of heart:

"But you, mother? And what about Marthe?"

"Come in and look at her!" she breathed softly, but her distress gave such a poignant nuance to her voice that I believed my sister to be already dead.

The room was dark and unlighted when we went in that same evening. We usually sensed a living being in the room. I preceded my mother and felt all alone in the room this time, as if Marthe's will had grown far more tense as it reached out to achieve its goal. And did I so well anticipate that goal that it had grown fused with my mind in such a way as to give the thing the illusion of reality? Could the peace issuing from singleness of idea in her still the moral whirlpools within me? All I knew was that when I entered the room, it seemed to be no longer inhabited.

She was lying on her bed hung with white tulle, close to the window, her face turned toward the light. Her locked bookcase, her dressing table with its draperies joining right above the mirror, had the air of things played out. The statuette, which she had shown me for

the first day on the day she paid a visit to my cave, was there together with the rosary, both grotesque vestiges of an effort that would plead for her in the heaven of Rupel folk-lore. As I drew near to have a look at her, I startled the robin who had returned with the fall.

I beheld her now, a transparent waxen mask, blotted with greenish shadows. Her eyes were fixed and to intercept her glance I had to lean over. Slowly she showed signs of recognition. The shadow of a smile stole into her eyes, but a sense of exactness forbids me to attempt to describe what lay underneath that fugitive glance.

We sat, my mother and I, beside the bed, when Scarab came in, announcing the arrival of both doctors. I mounted the stairway leading to my room. I did not go in. I sat down on the top step. I mused on the peculiar case of Marthe. Whenever nowadays I hear about hunger strikers, I am borne back to the minutes I passed on the stairs. An insignificant line set down in a code made up of unspeakable blunders, of blasphemies against the law of eternal beauty, will allow officers of the law to connive at suicide by hunger, justice looking on like a mute statue. The allegory that justice is a woman with bandaged eyes is wrong. A woman even temporarily blinded has bowels of compassion. I say this, I a man who is dwarfed and who cowers away from that veiled figure, I who may not publish this story until after my death.

The two doctors, really two bourgeois endowed with misplaced power, came out. They closed the door and consulted together.

"My dear colleague, it's a simple case of lack of nourishment."

"Ah . . . ah . . . yes . . . but I can't quite make it out. She eats . . . like an invalid, it is true, but still she eats," the other replied.

"Well, it's too late. She's passed the period of griping. Now we've got to alleviate the rest of physical life." They prescribed orange juice to be taken sieved through a piece of linen.

Then I thought: "It must be . . . I'm sure of it."

Marthe, condemned to hell since her childhood, died two days later. The horror we knew was about to melt into new reliefs. Lack of symmetry in passive mindless nature seems to be the work of the devil. But that is only because we do not see the symmetry in it as, in looking at a eucalyptus leaf, asymmetrical in itself, we are apt to forget that the tree as a whole is harmonious. We have no means of grasping the wholeness of a thing or by what it is qualified or the balance of its form. In some vast organism unknown to us Marthe functioned perfectly, excellently adjusted in her relationship to the other parts. This entity, beyond our powers of conception, is, it may be, a thing of flawless beauty and therein the blemish in my sister's face has perhaps no disfiguring significance, like a notch in the bark of a splendid tree.

In keeping vigil beside her that last night, I could not refrain from giving rein to incoherent thoughts, but I sensed the grandeur of her who was lying prone before me. Once, only once, did I try to draw forth a reply from her inert mask.

"What have you done, Marthe, dearest Marthe?" She fixed me with an unwavering look.

"Are you happy?" I asked, for it seemed that her gaze ached to tell me so. Then a glimmer of joy came into her quiet eyes, accompanied, no doubt, by the last stirring of human vanity which longed that I—at least I—should appreciate the beauty of what she had desired.

I kissed her and sat down again, continuing my vigil all night long, but I do not know at what moment she ceased to breathe, so far had her will, all during the night, under my very eyes, anticipated that moment.

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